THE TALE OF A TANK
AND OTHER YARNS

HAROLD ASHTON

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By

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TOPSY: THE TALE OF A TANK.

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I.

In which a novelty in Autumn Goods is introduced to Armageddon.

"There's something blooming well up!" said Tuggy Sparrow, of the 1/2 Limehouse Lingerers (Territorial), as he pulled out the safety plug of a Mills hand-grenade, and took cheerful aim at Brickdust Bill.

"And that something will bloomin'-well be me," shot in Bill, angrily, "if you will keep playin' the fat-headed idiot with a blasted pine-apple packed with fulminate. Go easy with the gas-meter, George, for Gawd's sake. Things are bad enough as they are, without bein' sent plop to Paradise by a pal. You're too intimate, Tuggy my lad, with the immejiate surroundin's of sudden death, to please me. Let's see, now, what was you before your King and Country called you, Tug? In what particular way was it *you* managed to elude the copper, eh?"

"I was Coroner's Officer," replied Mr. Sparrow, with immense dignity; "in which office I cultivated the arts an' the bloomin' graces of Observation, by keepin' my eyes open and my mouth shut—and continuin' the same in the perplexin' surroundin's of what the noospapers call Armygeddon—that's why I can inform you that there's somethin' u.p.—

Up! Did you ever know such a—ahem!—war as this is, Bill?"

"I never did, damn it," replied Bill.

"It ain't a war," went on Mr. Sparrow. "It's one big kerfoozle of a conjurin' trick. It's Lung Chung Su, and Maskelyne, and the Handcuff King, and Datas, all rolled together, and gorne stark, starin' dotty!"

"Amen—Selah, Tuggy, me child. It is so," remarked Bill. "And what sort of Hell-with-the-lid-off has the old man got for us now?"

"It's Hell-with-the-lid-*on*—not *off*," replied the ex-Coroner's Officer, bitterly. "They call 'em Tanks, an' from what I can make out, they're a sort of a cross between Noah's Ark, a hot pertater engine, a Zeppelin an' a super-extra Dreadnought. They're self-steerin', self-contained, self-propellin', self-conscious, and every other self you can think of. They can climb up mountains and down precipices, barbed wire sandwiches is their natural food, petrol is their beer, and the British Army—Gawd help it!—is their unnatural dwelling-place. There's a stud of 'em—or a battery, or a drove, or a leash—or whatever you may like to call it, waitin' in the bashful shelter of Petticoat Lane to waltz up and take a hand in the business early to-morrow mornin'."

"What are they like, Tug?" enquired Lance-corporal Darcy Traceville Camperdown (M.A., B.Sc., etc., etc.), as he lazily lit a gold-tipped cigarette at the flame of a diamond-and-ruby-studded patent lighter. "If I happen to meet one in the course of my early morning constitutional, how shall I recognise it?"

"You won't be able to recognise it, Tracey, darlin'," replied the Coroner's Officer, "if only half I hear about 'em's true. There's one, I'm told, which has been told off to attach herself to our exclusive mess. Topsy's her name, an' she's

due here or hereabouts in the cold an' clammy dawn of to-morrer as ever is. She's armour-plated, copper-bottomed, jewelled in seventeen holes, strikes the hours and the quarters like Big Ben; she's fitted with a bathroom, h. and c.; her drawin'-room's furnished with a 12 in. howitzer, disguised as a grand piano, she's got a machine-gun in the scullery, and a 12-96 searchlight reposin' in the attic. The plate-rack in the kitchen is fitted up with poison-gas and tear-shells, an' there's a chicken-run on the roof where the hens lay high-explosive eggs. . . . That's Topsy—Topsy in the rough——"

"Kindly cease firing," said Darcy Traceville Camperdown, M.A. "I'm afraid you've been drinking, my exuberant cock-sparrow."

"That's what you'll say *you've* been doin'," remarked the man of corpses and quests, "the first time you set eyes on Topsy! You'll think you've got 'em. The jim-jams, bad!"

"Will somebody kindly sit on his head?" asked the lance-corporal, wearily. "It's time to turn in, boys!"

* * * * *

There was very little sleep that night. At the witching hour the great guns began to roar. Heaven was streaked and slashed with the lambent flame of death and destruction, and Tuggy Sparrow and his pals roosted uneasily in their strawless nest in a deep shell-crater. They lay and cursed the guns as they waited for the tardy dawn.

At length it came, misty and grey, and cold as the dawn which marked Creation's first amazing morning. . . . Presently the heaving earth eased in her tremors as the giant bombardment lifted. A rocket, fired from the hidden batteries far behind, blazed and burst in magnificent stars of blue and green, whistles shrilled across the disrupted landscape, and out of shallow trench and deep shell-crater the muddy British Army leapt like grey goblins to the charge. There

was no lingering about the 1/2 Limehouse Lingerers. Corporal Darcy Traceville Camperdown (M.A., B.Sc., etc., etc.) spoke the word to his gummy-eyed crowd in shell-hole 99b, in his well-known, highly-cultured treble.

"Now then, crawl out, you—er—blightars! Hop it—and hail the—er—smilin' morn!"

"Right, sir!" came a sleepy chorus from the depths of the primordial crater.

"And, Tuggy—preen that—er—somewhat ruffled plumage ——"

Mr. Sparrow, who had been dreaming mistily, though very happily, of the old joys of inquests, post-mortems, jurymen sitting snug and jolly in their pew-like jury box in the Liberty and Freedom of Limehouse, rubbed the vision from his eyes with a reluctant fist, and tightened his belt another hole. He was just rising to the occasion, when, on the very edge of his shell-hole there sounded a ghostly "honk—ho—onk!" At the same moment a dazzling light flashed in his eyes. He looked up, and saw to his terror a hideous shape heave itself on to the verge of the crater—a monstrous vision, half whale, half elephant—horribly inhuman, and yet more than horribly human in the way it hunched itself up on the crunching rubble, and seemed to bend down and peer, like some frightful goblin, into the deeps of the crater. It seemed alive, crouching there—a ghastly monster of the crustacean period, buried for a thousand years, and suddenly resurrected.

Tuggy turned to Brickdust Bill, who was lying on his back with his mouthopen.

"Bill!" he whispered hoarsely. "Wake up, for Gawd's sake, an' tell me if I've got 'em! Can *you* see anythink?"

"Honk . . . ho—onk!" growled the Apparition. There was a sound of a thousand frying-pans fighting together inside the Beast; and Bill, suddenly awaking, and the awful Thing

on the lip of the shell-crater turning on its electrics at the very same moment ; and Tuggy Sparrow squatting there all of a tremble . . . well !

In peace time, Brickdust Bill was the bravest burglar that ever cracked a crib—or a head ; even now, with a small thing called a War on, he had been marked down for something in the Military Cross line for distinguished conduct under fire. But at the sudden unexpected sight of the Tank squatting there, glowering and gibbering at him, his bones turned to water, he felt his heart drop sheer down through his stomach into his left boot—and burying his sinful face in the sleeve of his coat, he sobbed like a child in agony over its first milk teeth.

Then, out of the dreadful, pre-historic Gloom, the Tank waved her waggly, scaly tail, and began slowly to turn round, just like a dog turns and twists before it finally settles down to sleep.

" Blimey ! " gibbered Bill. " The bloomin' Dragon's goin' to lay an egg. Hold my hand, Tuggy, an'—an'—I'll let you off that tanner you owe me. If you can think of an 'ymn, Tuggy, or anything of that sort, soothin'-like to the blighter . . . "

But the blighter suddenly changed her mind, and sitting up again, in the astonished morning, began to talk, in a rasping, gramophonish voice—

" Be—low, there ! Is that two-double-six Gerrard ? It's Topsy speakin'. G-r-r-rpr-rrrrup ! Topsy—the Terrible Tank. G-r-rrp ! We want a steward on board—half our crew down with sea-sickness—mortal bad. Fine openin' for a reliable man. Must be over military age and ineligible for general service, and must not object to usin' his own tin hat as a basin in the service of his King and his Country. Preference given to a man who—grrrrrp—can play the harmonium

and use an electric carpet sweeper for the front stairs. Knowledge of firearms, bombs, star-shells, whiz-bangs, gun-layin', an' other kinds of Hun strafin' useful, but not necessary as long as Applicant has a sorft an' soothin' voice so as to read the sad bits from 'The Rosary' to the skipper in the intervals of exhaustion projuced by his unfortunate spadgims of *mal-de-mer*! Any offers? . . . Goin'—goin'——"

Whereupon Tuggy Sparrow, Hero, up and spake, in a low, but remarkably valiant voice.

"As once Coroner's Officer for the Liberty and Freedom o' Lime'us—" he began, "accustomed to post-mortems, an' knowin' the signs of *rigor mortis*——"

"Honk!" growled the Tank, and there was another clattering row as of frying-pans and flat-irons fighting to the death inside her—"Enough said! You're the very man we want. This is the mortu-ary for you, me lad! Come aboard—and mind the step—and I daresay we can find an inquest for you to play with before our little trip is over! What's your name, sonny?"

"Privit Sparrow, sir—I mean, ma'am!" answered Tuggy, nervously. "Privit George Sparrow, of the 1/2 Lime'ouse Lingerers."

"Then, hop on, cocky! This is your perch, old bird!"

Somewhere amid the bowels of the terrible Tank an armour-plated trap-door opened, and a rope ladder was let down. Tuggy, all of a tremble, climbed up; he and the ladder were hauled into Topsy's secret, significant insides, and just as sunrise flooded the shell-scarred battlefield, the frisky old lady turned her snub nose toward the distant turmoil, and a clarion voice rang out—

"All stations to Baker Street! Change at Regent's Park for the Zoo—oo—logical Gardings! Plenty of room in front! Right away!"

II

How Private Sparrow became initiated into the rites and ceremonies of the Terrible Tank, and of his solemn communion with Commander Jenkins, D.S.O.

After the manner of Lemuel Gulliver, Tuggy Sparrow has returned from his Travels with Topsy. Accustomed, as he had been, to the conducting of inquests and the presentation of sworn depositions, in which the Truth, the Whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth is an essential element of the transactions, Mr. Sparrow's Recollections and certain extracts from his diary will be invaluable when Posterity, squatting in her garret after the war, attempts to sort out Fact from Fiction preparatory to inscribing that immortal chapter on "TANKS."

After rusticating for five days and nights in a shell-crater our gallant hero was ready for anything. He admits, however, that he felt rather like Jonah as he wriggled through the manhole and sought sanctuary of Topsy's hospitable bosom. He found himself in a warm, moist atmosphere, the aroma of which was very like the sewer outfall down by Barking Creek at low water. It reminded him of home. A dim, religious light illuminated Topsy's hot and heaving insides. The light was electric, and each bulb was carefully and artistically shaded with rose-pink paper. There was a warning Notice on the wall opposite regarding "Hostile Enemy Aircraft," ordering all blinds to be drawn after sunset, and cautioning passengers to be wary in discussing military matters in the presence of strangers. Next to this hung a beautifully illuminated picture representing a brilliantly-plumaged bird

hovering over her nest of open-beaked young and dangling a fat worm before them. This work of art was inscribed :

" WHAT IS HOME WITHOUT A MOTHER ? "

Underneath this, somebody had scrawled with a copying-ink pencil—" *Ah ! What indeed ?* " To the left of this, in a big gilt frame, there was a large sectional drawing of Topsy's own intimate anatomy. This was extremely interesting, but too private and confidential to be reproduced here. Between the picture of the bird's nest and the plan a thin, steel ladder ran perpendicularly into the upper gloom. It was labelled : " *To the gun-platform. No Admittance except on Business.*"

There were strange, uncanny mutterings and rumblings all around him, but no signs of anything or anybody human.

" I wonder if I'm dreamin' this ? " muttered Mr. Sparrow to himself. Irresolutely, he gazed around. Then he coughed noisily, but nobody came. His roving eye again sought the walls, and amid the litter of artistic and typographical decorations with which they were smothered, he detected an electric bell-push, labelled " EMERGENCY."

" That's clearly my situation," said he, as he pressed the button hard. There was a sudden whir like the noise of a racing gear in a ten-year-old taxicab ; there was a fierce and furious jolt, and with a sickening heave, Topsy sprang into immediate life and movement. Mr. Sparrow was flung across the narrow chamber. His nose, being somewhat prominent, struck a rung of the steel ladder, and he saw ten million sparks as the red gore flowed. . . . From the tangle of girders and things up above there came muffled shouts and curses.

" Hi ! Stop her ! What the—who the—where the—. WO ! Topsy ! 'Vast heavin', you fat-headed old raspberry-nosed hencoop ! Out collision-mats ! Stand by to repel

tree-trunks! . . . Topsy—Topsy—Topsy, stop your foolin'! Can't you hear your Uncle Jacob callin'! Wo—oo, mare!"

Out of the clatter and the clamour, and down the perilous steel ladder there came dangling and swaying a pair of groping feet adorned with purple socks and wool-worked carpet slippers. Following them, a suit of incredibly oily dungarees, much too large for the human soul they contained; and finally, the human soul itself, the pallid, wan face of which emitted the most weird, the most blistering blasphemies—the eyes of which blazed Death and Destruction—the teeth of which gnashed . . .

"*Who* did that?" snarled the vision, swinging round in the narrow compass of Topsy's stomach. "*Who* monkeyed with the Emergency-stop? Was it *you*—you double-dyed son of a partly-poached egg?" He lurched forward, did something with a brass handle let into the wall by the beautiful oleographic allegory of Motherhood; and Topsy, with a shudder and a groan, came to a standstill.

With that swift instinct which comes to mankind at moments of stress and upheaval, Private Sparrow recognised that he was in the sanctified presence of the Commander of this weird, amphibian craft. He was a very small man, this majestic personage, and his seared, hollow face bore the traces of desperate illness. A three days' beard sprouted through the grimed upper-crust of chin and cheek. Unutterable melancholy gloomed upon the jaundiced countenance; the whites of his eyes were yellow, and the Cupid bow of his young mouth was turned the wrong way, as though he were on the immediate verge of bitter tears, only controlled by an iron will.

Tuggy, being a properly-trained Terrier, saluted.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," he said, "but I am afraid it was me!"

"And who the blue and blitherin' blazes are *you*?"

"The new emergency hand, sir," says Tuggy. "The Steward, sir!"

"H—m!" replies the Commander, fixing Tuggy with his atrabilious eye. "You are, are you? What's your height?"

"Five foot seven an' three-quarters, sir."

"Fighting weight?"

"Eight stun eleven, sir."

"That's a bit on the heavy side for this job," said the Commander. "Unless you can train down to the standard size, which is is five-three and eight-two, I shall have to get you spokeshaved to fit our communication trenches! We're all tiddlers in this Tank!"

"I'm sorry, sir——"

"Pray don't apologise," said the Commander, pleasantly. "There's no doubt that you'll shrink after a day or two—if you don't fade away altogether, same as I'm doin'. Have you, by the way, ever been in a Tank before?"

"No, sir."

"Then, Heaven help you. What was your job in Blighty before they conscripted you into this tumultuous bloomin' circus?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," flashed back Tuggy, as he squared his shoulders and tried to look dignified through the gory mess of his broken nose. "I was an attested married man, drawin' thirty bob a week as Coroner's Officer, with perks——"

"Then, you know all about murders and suicides and mortuaries?"

"All there is to know, sir."

"And in case of anything sad and solemn happening to me in this tempestuous and tumultuous shemozzle, I can rely upon you to do the proper thing, eh? To conduct with decorum and decency the last rites and ceremonies? To

post-mortem my remains? To sit in inquest upon my cold and clammy clay? To return a verdict in accordance with the evidence, s' help you? "

"I'll do my best, sir," replied Tuggy, respectfully.

"Then, shake!" cried the Commander, sticking out an oil-smothered fist. "Put it there, my son. I hereby appoint you Coroner Extraordinary to this ruddy Tank, and all that she contains—for better for worser, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, drunk or sober, till death us do part. . . . "

"Amen," chanted Mr. Sparrow, quite overcome with the solemnity of the occasion.

"And," concluded the Commander, in a deep, hollow voice, "may the Lord have mercy on your soul!"

"Haven't you got it a little bit mixed, sir?" said Private Sparrow. "That's a bit of the marriage service—I was married once, sir, an' don't I know it?—and a bit of the Old Bailey——"

"Maybe I have," replied Commander Jenkins, wearily. "It's the environment of this filthy old Tank that's responsible. It mixes all your metaphors something shockin'. It was just the same earlier on in the war, when I was a sub. on board Submarine C 999, livin' for six weeks on the bottom of the Sea of Marmora with nothin' to eat but sardines and Epsom salts. But they were happy days, Mr. Coroner, compared with these. Happy days! You never got sea-sick in a submarine. But you do in a Tank—my ***word***, you do. When Topsy gets going, she'd turn the stomach of a two-year-old tiger, the way she heaves and humps and shudders. And—by gum!—there she goes again. Mac's gettin' up steam down in the engine-room! Can't you feel it?"

Private Sparrow both felt it and heard it. Topsy began to sigh, and then to mutter, and then to heave. So did

Commander Jenkins, D.S.O. The shocking pallor of his face became suddenly more pronounced, his eyes rolled, and he collapsed, a limp heap, up in the corner.

"Call—call—the chambermaid!" he gasped. "Ring the bell. I've got it again. . . . bad! Not that bell, you infernal idiot." (Tuggy's hand was groping for the button labelled "EMERGENCY.") "The other one, to the left! You—you—ring once for the boots—twice for the waiter, and three times for—for the cham—for the chamber. . . ."

The remainder of the sentence was lost in spasms and cataclysms. Topsy's tricks had sprung the mine in the innermost recesses of Commander Jenkins' delicate anatomy, until even Mr. Sparrow, hardened as he was to mortuary sights and sounds, experienced a pang of sympathy for the writhing sufferer. Thrice he rang the bell, and at his summons another pair of ridiculous legs came waving down the ladder, heralding the arrival of Topsy's second in command—Lieut. Frank Hardy, late of H.M.S. "Irrepressible." Together he and the ex-Coroner's Officer bent over the racked and trembling form of the Commander.

The attack had been sudden and awful. But the worst was over now. Commander Jenkins was lying back, eyes closed, face bathed in perspiration, and lips twitching with the after effects of the agony he had just been through.

"'Straordinary thing!" said Mr. Hardy, in a low voice, to Tuggy. "Bravest officer in the British Navy. Torpedoed three Turkish warships in the Sea of Marmora. Sunk a transport one morning and strafed a Zep. at tea-time. Ran the blockade three times, and flapped home with an emergency propeller made out of a coal-scuttle that happened to be on board at the time. Fobbed off with a measly D.S.O., when he ought by rights to be wearin' a necklace of V.C.'s! And then with a weak stomach vitiated in the service of his

King and his Country, to be slung across to France and given the command of the nastiest-tempered Tank in the whole new fleet of land tortoises. Cruel, I call it. He ought to be in a nursin' home instead of tossing Bopsy—I mean bossin' Topsy. There's only one thing that will pull him round—and, thank God, I've got a dose of it left ! "

He put his hand in his pocket and drew out a silver-topped flask. He unscrewed the top. A soft and subtle aroma tickled the nostrils of Mr. Sparrow.

" You hold his head up," said the young officer, " whilst I administer the jorum."

The effect was magical. Commander Jenkins opened his eyes, and gurgled softly as the elixir trickled down his throat. The gleam returned to his eyes, colour to his cheeks, a smile to his wan face. He lifted a trembling hand to the lieutenant.

" Kiss me, Hardy ! " he whispered. Then, with a happy sigh, his head sank back, and he slept like a weary child.

" Cherry brandy laced with rum—the finest corpse-reviver in existence," said Mr. Hardy, as he replaced the stopper carefully.

" He'll be as fit as a falcon in half-an-hour, if you let him have his sleep out. And then, things won't half hum, if I know the Commander. He'll give Topsy and all of us what for ! So look out for squalls ! "

III

In which the Mobilisation of the Tanks is fully and faithfully described.

The sun came up hot and strong on a morning which will ever be memorable in the records of the British Army. It was the usual kind of autumn morning, and the same old, familiar,

hump-producing scene—a landscape charred and churned with the maniac devilry of war, rank with the stink of burnt powder; all rubble, and ruin and smoke. Desolation and awful dreariness marked everything.

Here and there lay farmsteads, smashed and smoking. There were clumps of trees with all their summer foliage torn away in the hot blast of shell-fire; there were cornfields flat and battered as though a wild and whooping thunder-storm had passed over them; there was a long, long road running straight out into the everlasting distance, and lined with an avenue of tall trees. The trunks were all that was left of them, and so seared and stript were they that they looked like hop-poles left to bleach in the September weather.

The heat of the sun smote upon the shell-holes and the craters, drawing the damp out of them, so that they steamed like vast coppers on a washing-day. One little wood at the curve of the British salient had escaped the storm of steel and the swirl of shrapnel; in its bosky shelter was hidden the outrageous cortège of "Duggy's" big surprise for the bewildered Hun—to wit, The Tanks, of whom Topsy the Terrible was the chaste and maidenly forerunner.

Altogether, there were eleven of this fabulous family, and they were catalogued in the G.H.Q. Museum as T1, T2, T3—and so on. Their names were Tiger Tim, Tiddleywinks, Toenail Tommy, Twinkles, Tweedledum, Tweedledee, Tilda, Tina, Theodora, and Topsy. They were each fitted with a gigantic motor-horn, and each horn was pitched in a different key, so that if Tiddleywinks had an accident, or Theodora happened to be overcome with sudden stomach troubles, he or she could send out distress signals which would be promptly recognised by the others in the immediate vicinity. It was found possible, too, after a little practise, to play a

pleasing and enlivening tune upon the combined honkers when the eleven Terrible Tanks were assembled *en masse*, and this was encouraged by the authorities in that it not only conduced to keeping up the spirits of the crews, but also had a disturbing—nay, a disrupting effect upon enemy units lurking in the neighbourhood.

Before the Tanks made their bow in the presence of an astonished and trembling battlefield, they had already learnt to play with a considerable amount of *verve* and feeling the opening bars of

There's a home for little chil-l-dren,
Above the bri-i-i-ght blue sky—

and one or two simple and soothing melodies like that.

It was to Topsy that the job was allotted to crawl out from behind the wood and take a preliminary trot round just after the barrage had lifted. Hence her sudden and unexpected appearance upon the edge of the crater which formed the temporary home of Private George Sparrow and his merry, mud-stained men, and hence the success of her wooing smile upon the tractile carcase of Tuggy, and of the incorporation of him into the limited company thereof.

Whilst Commander Jenkins, D.S.O., was sleeping off the dire effects of his *mal-de-mer*, Mr. Hardy, with breezy naval hospitality, conducted the new arrival through the internal economy of Topsy. "Something like a submarine—if you've ever been in one—only worse," said he, with a cheerful grin. "Everything's fixed up on the labour-saving tack. You press the button, and Topsy, curse her! does the rest. See that handle there, marked P.M.G.? No—it isn't anything to do with the Postmaster-General; it's the Greek equivalent for 'Port Machine Gun.' When you get within chewin' up distance of the enemy, you just turn the handle, and Topsy

shakes the corpse-manufacturin' pepper-pot over 'em. There's another swagger cayenne-caster on the starboard side—S.M.G. And there the same principle of destructive economy's involved. Simple as A.B.C.—eh? What? Isn't it O.K.?

"And now," went on the lieutenant, moved to enthusiasm, "here's another pretty little thing." He turned on the light over a miniature switchboard studded with bright buttons, all of which bore strange cabalistic designs.

"Now, look at this, and listen," said he, bending forward over a button marked "A.W.C." "It isn't what you might think it is; so you needn't go guessin' wild. Listen hard, Mr. Sparrow; lend me thine ears while I shove the bright and shiny."

He pressed the button, and Tuggy, turning his bullet head sideways so as to give his left ear full play (his right had been knocked out by shell-shock), he heard distinctly, though apparently at a great distance, a rythmic, metallic clash—a quick whir like the preliminaries to a striking grandfather clock—and then another clash . . . whir, clash—whir, clash—whirrrr. . . .

"That," said Lieutenant Hardy, with his bright, seraphic smile—"that is darlin' old Topsy-wopsy a-gnashin' of her milk teeth. What you can hear in the dim and distant offin' is the A.W.C.—the Automatic Wire Clippers engaged in the satisfyin' recreation of chewin' up the barbed wire entanglements erected at great sacrifice and regardless of cost by the Kaiser's innumerable hosts. It's all So Simple, as the hire-furnishin' ad's say on the Underground!

"We will now proceed," he continued, "to the telegraph counter. First to the left—and mind the step. The telegraph office is open night and day—stamps, postal orders, war loan and insurance business from nine a.m. to four p.m. Parcels post in the new buildin' next door. You are requested not

to waste public time by conversing with the young lady behind the counter. . . ."

Mr. Hardy was now engaged over a little table spread invitingly with brass handles and curly wire over which hung a couple of ear-pieces. As he spoke, something hit Topsy with a dull thud. She shuddered, and swayed like a wounded hippopotamus.

" Hul-lo ! " muttered Mr. Hardy, " Topsy's gettin' a ticklin' in the short ribs. Hold up, old lady. . . ."

B—rrr—ang ! The Tank heaved again, the little electric light glowing over the telegraph counter flickered twice, went dim—and then expired. Lieutenant Hardy and Tuggy Sparrow bumped up against one another in the inky darkness.

" I rather fancy," said Mr. Hardy, " that *that* was a direct hit—and rather a nasty one ! "

There was a crackling sparkle in the gloom of Topsy's tortured internals.

" By gum ! " said the lieutenant, " that's Wireless calling !" He groped his way to the " counter," fixed on the ear-pieces in the dark, and began fumbling with the keys.

" H—m ! C.O. says : ' *Why—the—hell—don't—you—make—your—self—scarce ? Come—in—out—of—the—wet. Enemy battery—has—got—your—range—and—is—shelling—you.—You'll—bust—the—whole—show—if—you're—not—careful. Keep—on—the—move. Pro-ceed—towards—enemy's—first—line—trenches—followed—by—Tiger—Tim—and—Tiddl* ——"

Bang—*crash ! !* Once again Topsy lurched drunkenly, letting forth a sharp, metallic yell of anguish, as a well-pitched shell hit her fair and square high up. Squatting there in the pitch dark, Private Sparrow began fervently to wish he had never come.

" Gee ! " cried Mr. Hardy, " there goes our top-hamper—

and our gold-plated weathercock! And, but for our three-inch armour-plate there would have gone the immortal sorrow-soaked souls of the faithful crew! I wonder whether that slight disturbance has interfered with the beauty sleep of the Commander? or whether he's still dreamin' of England, Home and Beauty, Bath Buns, and Battersea Park?"

"Hadn't you better call the crew, sir?" suggested Tuggy, respectfully. He was beginning to feel nervous.

"The crew!" gurgled Mr. Hardy, and his voice sounded hobgoblinish in the inky blackness. "Do you imagine, my simple-hearted soldier-man, that this is a first-class battleship, or an armoured cruiser, or a mine-sweeper—or even a mackerel boat? The crew! Why,—him, me and you—we *are* the crew—Admiral, Captain, Commander, first luff, snotties, gunners, cooks, bottle-washers—the whole blessed shemozzle!"

"Do you mean to say, sir," gibbered Tuggy, "that we three have got to run this gharstly crematorium of a ship, or whatever you call it, on our own?"

"I do," replied the lieutenant. "The Tank system is worked, primarily, upon the conservin' of man-power. 'That,' says our beloved Commander-in-Chief, 'is the only way to win this war.' The blighter who invented Topsy and the rest of 'em knew what he was about. He's an A1, copper-bottomed labour-saver, jewelled in every hole—own brother to the genius who thought of the automatic carpet-sweeper, the mechanical piano, and the O.K. calculating machine. And, as the British Navy were eatin' off their heads with ennui through havin' nothin' to do in the North Sea, Mr. Lloyd George sends along a post card to Admiral Jellicoe requestin' the loan of one or two able seamen to run his new land-fleet for a spell! That's why we're here, and that's why——"

Brrang—biff—plop! Another smasher in Topsy's long-suffering bread-basket. Once again she shook herself like an

enraged cow teased by a midsummer gadfly, and at the third waggle of her wounded fin, Commander Jenkins awoke. He had completely recovered from his torturing attack of *mal-de mer*. Like Richard he was himself again.

" Stand by the starboard engines, Mac ! " he roared.

" Aye, aye, sir," replied Lieutenant Hardy (who was also Mac).

" Navigating Officer, keep your left eye on the periscope screen ! "

" Aye, aye, sir," replied Lieutenant Hardy (who was also Navigating Officer).

" Your left on the gunsight of P.M.G. ! "

" Aye, aye, sir," replied the Lieutenant (who was also chief gunner).

" Your other one on the liquid fire control ! "

" I'll try, sir," responded the obedient engineer, navigating officer, gunner and gasman all combined. " If I'd only got an eye in my——"

" Don't talk to *me*, sir ! " roared the Commander, " with your ' if's ' and your ' only's.' You've *got* to have another eye somewhere—or you'll know the reason why. We don't want any—any Nelsons on board this craft ! Belay ! Spare hands to the Automatic Wire Clippers "—(Tuggy Sparrow crawled to the station indicated, and spread out a shaking finger toward the little brass button)—" and, now, we ***shan't*** be long."

At this point the Wireless made a few interesting remarks. The Commander dashed to the operating table and jammed the listeners to his ears.

" Aye, aye, sir—I mean miss . . . Topsy speaking . . . Two-double-four-six Bank ? . . . No, *I* didn't order any sausages . . . hold the line please . . . don't cut me off, miss ! . . . Oh, the O.C. speaking, is it ? . . . Tank battle

squadron, headed by H.M.S. Topsy, slow cruiser, ordered to proceed, line ahead in direction of Thiepval, north-east-by-east, to steer by dead reckoning if aeroplanes lost sight of . . . decks to be cleared for action, crews to remain invisible, and each Tank upon sighting enemy machine-gun emplacement to make straight for it, sit on it, and remain sitting until further orders. If you don't see what you want, please ask for it . . ."

* * * * *

" Honk—hoo—nk ! " cried Topsy, as she started unsteadily and lopsidedly upon her murderous career.

" They're off ! " yelled the grimy, happy-faced crowd watching the circus from the shell-crater lately vacated by Private Sparrow.

" Honk—honk ! " replied Topsy's ten little brothers and sisters, as they enmerged, dragon-like, from the shelter of their friendly wood.

Upon the conning tower of Tiddleywinks stood a little bantam of a man, waving a conductor's baton, as dignified and dainty as though he were at Queen's Hall on a Saturday " Pop " night. Magnificently the Tanks rose to the occasion, and tuning their motor-horns to the melody demanded by the khaki-clad conductor, burst solemnly into the strains of

On-ward, Chris-tian, Soo—ool—giers !

Armageddon had started—in real earnest this time.

IV

IN WHICH THE TERRIBLE TANKS SET FORTH UPON THEIR MURDEROUS MISSION, TO THE DISMAY AND DISMEMBERMENT OF THE PESTIFEROUS HUN.

A TREMENDOUS British cheer went up as the Terrible Tanks sallied out under the bright sun to do their dread business. The great guns behind had already done their bit, smashing everything on the disrupted skyline. Tens of thousands of our tough Tommies watched with breathless interest this new phase of war. The whole show was ridiculously like a pantomime. It was steeped in the comic spirit of Harry Tate. It was zoological in its rough and ready humour.

The Tanks looked like nothing else on earth. There was something of a crocodile in their appearance—a crocodile who had eloped with a baked potato can after a wild wooing, married hastily at the registry office in Vesuvius, and produced a family of Jabberwocks. They were garbed in streaks of paint, after the manner of the ancient Britons. Near at hand, these barbaric colours made the beholder feel cross-eyed and colour-blind, so vivid and startling were they. But there was method in this seeming artistic madness. At a distance these furious colours mingled magically into the surrounding landscape, rendering the tanks practically invisible.

At their first appearance the Army cheered wildly. Then, as Topsy and her inebriated-looking satellites began to move slowly and ponderously over the uneven ground, the waddle of them was so ludicrous that the beholders collapsed into a gurgle of insane laughter. They sat down and laughed. They rolled in the mud and laughed again. The genius of high comedy, which is the ruling spirit of our fighting forces,

and which produces heartening and healthy laughter, had scored again!

* * * * *

Topsy seemed quite aware that to her had been assigned the honour of leading the way in the Great Advance. Already had she been hit three times, but not "holed." Bravely her skeleton crew of Tiddlers assembled her lethiferous ingredients, tuned up "Stinkin' Jimmy" (by which name her foully-aromatic engine is known), poured a can of lubrication over the hinge of her huge wire-clippers, unkinked the hose of her liquid fire supply, tightened the belts of the snub-nosed little machine guns, and otherwise titivated Topsy for the wedding march.

Commander Jenkins wriggled into the Liliputian conning tower, and sat huddled over a chart of the battlefield, with a compass near at hand, and the route of his progress marked in a thin, wavering, red line. Mr. Hardy was "forrard" in the engine-room, wrestling with the complicated entrails of Stinkin' Jimmy. Presently he jerked back the lever, and Topsy, with a snarl and a toot, began to crawl off upon her murderous mission.

Overhead the questing aeroplanes of the Royal Flying Corps circled and wheeled—wingèd gods in Olympus, watching the show with tremendous interest. In strict "battle-line ahead" the Tanks moved, with ponderous, ridiculous gravity. Behind Topsy, behind Tiddleywinks, and behind all the rest of the armoured galaxy marched, in close formation, masses of British infantry, using the hospitable monsters as cover in their slow, but sure advance. Tuggy Sparrow, observing the procession from a convenient machine-gun loophole, carved out of Topsy's humped hindquarters, began to feel at home; to him it was all very like an enlarged and important inquest on the remains of some shattering earthquake, with

a khaki-clad *posse* of jurymen strolling along to view the corpse.

The movement was protracted at first, but as Topsy and the following ten Terribles got into their stride, and began to feel their feet, so to speak, and the ground began to crunch and crumble under their tread, the crowd behind warmed up correspondingly and broke into a gladsome kind of trot.

Over in the disturbed and demolished enemy lines, the Germans awaited their coming with mixed feelings. They turned all their available armoury on to Topsy, and let her have it full rip—shell, shrapnel, bombs, whiz-bangs, torpedoes, mortars, hand-grenades, and all the other *materiel* and appurtenances of modern frightfulness. The welcome of machine-gun bullets was particularly warm and unanimous. They rattled on Topsy's crocodile hide like a hailstorm on a corrugated-iron roof. But, as a swimmer prepares for a cross-channel tussle with the tempestuous ocean by smearing his body with some oleaginous concoction, so Topsy had anticipated the battering storm of lead in a similar manner —with a copious top-dressing of cart-grease. The bullets hit her by the thousand ; but they glanced off with a whang and a whine, spending their fury in thin air. The noise of them as they struck sounded to the snug crew inside like the clicking of innumerable typewriters in a busy city office.

The big stuff missed her and the rest of the cruiser squadron ; even a Prussian artilleryman can't get the drop on a gallivanting Tank with a " Johnson " or a " Coal-box " at small-arms range. And the withering fire of nickel and lead did very little damage to the charging infantry, with Topsy, Tiddley and Co. in their immediate vicinity to act as shield and buckler, guide, philosopher and friend.

And so it was that the unhealthy terrain of No Man's Land was traversed at a smaller loss than ever before in the

undying history of the Big Push. Fifteen minutes of bumping, lumping caterpillar-crawling brought Topsy to the German first line, hit in a thousand places, but hale and hearty still. Under her mothering lee our Tommies crawled and crouched, leaving her shelter for a few moments of crowded glorious life to toss their bombs over the whitewashed parapet, to pour a fierce, sudden volley into the huddled ranks of Hunnery, and then to slip back before the gruel could be returned with any effect.

Commander Jenkins' flame-coloured eyes were blazing in the pallid oil-smeared setting of his Jove-like countenance. Mr. Sparrow, at hand to render all the assistance in his power, watched his chief with a mixed feeling of terror and admiration. He was doing sixteen things at once with that masterly completeness, that splendid thoroughness with which the British Navy is so marvellously equipt. He was commanding the ship, navigating her, deploying her, diverting her, working the wireless, answering the telephone, feeding and firing the guns, mixing the liquid fire to its necessary consistency, boxing the compass, holding animated conversation with Mr. Hardy down in the engine-room, marking off the chart in careful, mathematic inches—and at the same time observing the animated battle-picture as it moved before his all-seeing eye upon the illuminated screen of the periscope.

" Here beginneth the first lesson," said he, as Topsy began to climb laboriously the deadly slope of the enemy trench, topped by a dreadful *impasse* of barbed wire. He rang up Mr. Hardy, who was busily engaged in oily dialogue with Stinkin' Jimmy and watching the pressure-gauge with an anxious eye, for Jimmy was back-firing with significant sullenness which suggested an imminent nervous breakdown.

" Can you whack James up to another thirty revolutions ? " cried the Commander. " We're just about on the crest of

Ararat, or Mont Blong, or Primrose Hill, or somethin' similar, and this bloomin' ark seems to be lingerin' a trifle. *Can* you whack her up, Mac ? "

" I'm afraid, sir . . . " began the far-away voice of Mr. Hardy, " I'm afraid it can't be done. There's something wrong with faithful James, sir. Swallowed a fly—and the fly's stuck in his throat. Or, maybe, it's a fish bone. Anyway, he's gaspin' for breath, and his eyes are waterin' something pathetic ! "

" That's the worst of them d——d Diesel engines," growled Commander Jenkins. " They've all got delicate throats which wouldn't get passed by a Medical Board, even at Mill Hill, which is *the* limit of medical mis-jurisprudence. But it's *got* to be done, Mr. Hardy, or we shall have to perish in the attempt. Tell James, with my respectful compliments, that the eyes of the British nation are upon us at this critical moment in the fate of our island story, that the newspaper correspondents are hoverin' around, lickin' their pencil-stumps, and goin' through their pocket-dictionaries to find out how to spell ' ichthyosaurus ' . . . tell him . . . oh, tell him any bloomin' old thing ; but whack him up, Mr. Hardy, whack him up, and remind him that England expects that every Jimmy, stinkin' or otherwise, this day will do his damndest ! "

" Aye, aye, sir ! " replied the obedient chief engineer. " I'll do the whackin'-up, sir, if you don't mind takin' the risk of being hoisted to Kingdom Come on the wings of Jimmy's last expirin' breath. Another twenty revolutions 'll probably bust the show, sir ! "

" Then, let her rip, Mac ! "

" Aye, aye, sir ! " came the muffled voice from the engine-room. " I would advise you to hang on by your back teeth, sir . . . somethin's bound to go ! "

"Very well, Mr. Hardy. Somebody said once, Mr. Hardy, that War is Hell. I'm beginning to believe it. If the worst does happen, I'll meet you on the cinder path in the Incandescent Hereafter. Mr. Hardy—farewell! And now, kindly give James what-for!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"And, *now*, Mr. Coroner's officer!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" replied the faithful and admiring Tuggy through his chattering teeth.

"You'd better give the gentlemen of the jury the straight tip to stand from under. We're goin' to circumvent the impossible by performin' the incredible, my perky cock-sparrow! In another minute, unless the ring-bolts hold, and the triple-brass of our biler is as flawless as the Koh-i-Noor, we shall be tappin' on the garden gate of Paradise! If you have tears, prepare to shed 'em now!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Tuggy saluted, and tried to think of a suitable hymn.

* * * * *

Topsy had stopped in her valiant attempt to surmount the giddy height of the Prussian parapet. She was very near the summit as Tuggy Sparrow squeezed his head and shoulders through the manhole to warn off the troops crowding around her heaving carcase.

"Gentlemen!" he began; "Gentlemen of the Ju——," but at his sudden appearance and the sound of his voice, the crowd drowned his warning shout in a fusillade of cheers and cries of "Give her a leg up! Now then, boys, all together!" Together they shoved and heaved; at the fresh impetus Stinkin' Jimmy made one more valiant effort, the full-fed engine roared like a wounded dragon, and with the sound of a thousand frying-pans falling down the back-stairs of an ironmongery store-room, Topsy accomplished

the incredible, and Tuggy Sparrow dived down again in time to obey the Commander's order to "Stand by the wire-clippers!"

Topsy walked through the parapet with all the ease of a hot carving-knife severing a pound of butter. Her squat nose smuggled amorously at the barbed wire entanglement, and the wicked wires embraced her passionately. It was but for a moment. Tuggy's thick thumb pressed the button marked "A. W. C.," the giant scissors gnashed and gnashed again, and before you could say "kamarad," Topsy was through the zareba, with her alligator body astride the trench. It was packed with fat and flabby defenders of the Fatherland. Those who could, ran; others stayed behind, to fall on their faces in trembling worship of the Moloch, whose angry body lay across their trench, like a steel bridge spanning a chasm—spitting fire and calamity from her port and starboard guns and snipping viciously right and left with her demon scissors.

The few bombs and grenades which were pitched at her did no military damage; indeed, there was so little danger from the half-paralysed Germans, that Commander Jenkins shoved his head out of his private porthole and advised the enemy to "Cease snowballing and surrender!"

Which they did. In ten minutes the trench was cleared, the work of consolidation began, and Topsy's weary crew were settling down to a well-earned rest, when the order came through, "Proceed at once to attack and capture the village of F————, *lat.* so-and-so; *long.* thus and thus."

"Heigho!" sighed the Commander. "No peace for the wicked! All aboard!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" murmured the crew.

V

How Lieut. Hardy Won his Cricket Match.

Tuggy Sparrow's heart was in his boots as Topsy, pride of the battle-fleet, hitched up her skirts like an old lady circumnavigating a puddle, and crawled out, dragon-wise, on her murderous career. And the British Army cheered. How they cheered! The sun was up now, drawing the steam from the sodden shell-holes—even the sun seemed to be grinning at the sight. And as for the Army, when they had done cheering they sat down in the squishy landscape and laughed themselves helpless at the pantomime. For pantomime it was—there was no other word for it.

"Battle-line ahead," was the order sent out over the clicking "wireless," and H.M.S. "Topsy" led the advance.

"It shall never be said," remarked Commander Jenkins, "that the British Navy went into battle without flying the old flag," and from a locker at his feet he withdrew a white ensign, which he unrolled and handed to Mr. Sparrow.

"I knew there was something the matter with the old girl," he went on. "In her anxious haste to harry the Hun she's setting out on her constitutional without her silk chemise. Mr. Sparrow——"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Just crawl out aft over grandmamma's bustle and fix up her chimmy—otherwise the flag that waves! We must have everything shipshape on this craft!"

"Very good, sir!" And Tuggy clambered up the thin iron ladder, emerged in the neighbourhood of Topsy's terrible tail, and fixed the flag. For a moment, before returning below, he surveyed the scene, and saw Tiddleywinks and the rest of the squadron crawling out like encrustrated caterpillars from the seclusion of the adjacent wood. And as

they emerged, one by one they hoisted their ensigns, and the massed band of giant hooters combined in producing a very fair imitation of "A Life on the Ocean Wave," with variations, according to the irregularities of the ground they were traversing.

Two or three of the Tanks were already in difficulties. Like ants on the war-path, they refused to go round anything. One started to climb a tree, as if it was engaged on a bird's-nesting expedition. It got half-way up before the tree collapsed, and down it came, with a reverberating crash. This dull and sickening thud winded the beast for a minute or so, but she speedily recovered and went on. Another burrowed down a vast shell-hole like a ferret into a rabbit warren. But a battalion of infantry—the Whitechapel Wonderlanders—who happened to be at hand, made a concerted movement of rescue and hauled her out. A third, hit in her steering department by a stray shell, deliberately turned round and steered a course of her own, chasing an ammunition column with a passionate desire, evidently, to make a late breakfast of shrapnel on toast. This misguided ichthyosaurus eventually made a determined attempt to commit suicide in a pond before another shell whacked her up behind and shook her up into sanity. Then she tacked back into the battle-line.

"Slow, but sure!" commented Commander Jenkins, as he glanced at his watch. "Over the measured mile, Topsy ain't exactly a flier. Log her down at one knot per hour, Mr. Hardy, and while you are about it, you might make a war-savings note of recommendation to G.H.Q. to the following effect—

'Commander Jenkins presents his compliments to the meteorological department and suggests it would be a saving of expense if, instead of issuing twenty-guinea stop-watches to Tank timekeepers, they served out shilling hour-glasses.'"

"Aye, aye, sir!" responded the ghostly voice of Mr. Hardy . . . and at that moment the real business began.

No Man's Land had been traversed under a scattering, but quite harmless fusillade of rifle and machine-gun opposition. Then Topsy, with a snort of fury, put her wicked old head down and rammed the triple fencing of barbed wire which protected the first line of German trenches. She walked through it like a trumpetting elephant clearing a garden fence, and shoving over the parapet as though it were no more than a pile of plum-puddings, sat down, like a slightly winded dowager after a dance, slap in the middle of the Hun trench, with her head comfortably reposing on one bank and her tail snuggling the other.

Very deliberately Topsy did this. She might have been going to by-bye in a nice, warm feather bed. The amazed Huns, as they scuttled from under, heard her placid sigh as she settled down.

"Stand by the starboard gun!" roared Commander Jenkins, as he himself took up his position by the port weapon. "Let her rip!"

"But—but—I've never fired a machine-gun in my life, sir!" stammered Tuggy Sparrow, aghast at the proposition. He fingered the long belt of cartridges fearfully.

"Fathead!" snorted the Commander. "All you've got to do is to turn that handle. Follow me, and do as I do, and we'll paralyse the blighters in next to no time!"

So, back-to-back, with their hindquarters touching, the Commander and Tuggy let her rip, port and starboard. The trench was enfiladed; Topsy, wreathed in flame, was spitting bullets right and left, to the accompaniment of a cackling roar, and the Huns went down like ninepins.

A few of the enemy turned in desperation and hurled bombs at the quivering monster. They burst harmlessly on her

armour plate with no more effect than rotten eggs, and the bombers, having expended their fruitless fury and unable to run the gauntlet of the wholesale peppering supplied by the Commander and Tuggy Sparrow, flung up their hands with the neighbourly cry of "kamarad," and surrendered to the inevitable.

Having nothing better to do for the moment, Mr. Hardy poked his head out of the spyhole by Topsy's left eyeball, and saw to his intense indignation a huge Prussian climbing laboriously over the crocodile's inert hindquarters. His object was manifest. There was a wicked gleam in his eye, which was fixed, mesmerically, upon the flag that still flew triumphantly aft of the terrible Tank. Slowly, inch by inch, he wriggled along, with a bag of charged bombs slung at his shoulder. He was within a few feet of the flagstaff when Mr. Hardy spotted him. The lieutenant wrenched open the forward manhole, squeezed his head and shoulders through it, and just as the German was stretching forth his hand to collar the flag, yelled out, "Hi! Hands off, you sacreligious wash-out!"

The Hun turned half round and saw Mr. Hardy emerging like a conjuring trick from Topsy's bonnet.

"Ach!" he cried, and gripping the sides of the tank firmly with his plump legs, he shifted a trifle sideways, plunged his hand in his bag, extracted a bomb therefrom, and took deliberate aim at his opponent. Stuck half-way in and half-way out of the tight manhole, Mr. Hardy attempted, and attempted in vain, to disappear. He was hopelessly wedged, and the German, observing his dilemma, grinned an evil, triumphant grin. It was an easy shot, to hit this Englishman. Dead easy! Three times he swung his arm backwards and forwards, measuring carefully the distance with his red, piggish little eye.

Lieut. Hardy was a keen cricketer and a first class batsman. He appreciated the wisdom of keeping your eye on the ball, if you want to keep your wicket up. So he poised his lissom body, from the waist up, and, with perfect coolness, watched with a calculating eye the swing of that arm and the grip of the fat fingers which held the ball of death. At the fourth swing, the German released his missile with a sudden wrist movement, and the bomb came spinning at Mr. Hardy's head. Eyes wide open, and lips tightly set, the tanker jerked his head slightly sideways—and the bomb whizzed by his left ear. A second and a third followed. He ducked to the second, swerved to the third, and so missed death by inches. It was exciting business, this game, but in the thrill of it, Mr. Hardy still retained his wits so completely as to notice that all three bombs did not explode until they had passed him for a couple of seconds. The next, or the one after that, would probably hit him ; even this blundering German couldn't fail to score a bullseye presently, at so close and easy a range.

So Mr. Hardy made a rapid calculation.

" With luck, and the same timing, I might just manage it," he said to himself. " A second and a half, perhaps—no more ! "

And so it was that when the German tossed his next ball at his watchful opponent's head, Mr. Hardy changed his tactics. He neither dodged nor ducked. The bomb came well to the off. Mr. Hardy flung out his hand, caught it, and in an incredibly quick return, hurled it back at his enemy. He was a better cricketer than the Hun. The bomb hit him fair and square in the midriff . . . and the flag-stealer became a casualty so complete as to be unidentifiable when his remains were collected afterwards.

As for the gallant Mr. Hardy, his tensed muscles became suddenly slack at the end of his duel, so that he easily slipped back through the manhole, collapsing in a limp heap upon Topsy's hospitable floor.

"Where the blazes have you been?" said Commander Jenkins, "short shore leave—or what?"

"Sorry, sir," replied the lieutenant, with rather a weak smile. "The rigging wanted a little attention; and—and seeing you otherwise employed, I thought I'd see to it!"

Next to report was Able-seaman-coroner Sparrow, who had also been taking a worm's eye view of the situation.

"White flag on the weather bow, sir," said he. "Fat German with his dress shirt off, sir, and a wavin' of it on the end of his bayonet, sir!"

"Anything else, Mr. Sparrow?"

"We're also bein' surrounded, sir!"

"Surrounded? That be shivered for a tale. Stand by the starboard pepper-pot. About how many should you reckon 'em to be?"

"About a thousand, sir! And every man Jack of 'em has got his hands up, sir!"

A grim smile lit up the smudgy countenance of Commander Jenkins, D.S.O.

"Then if that's the case, Mr. Sparrow," said he, "you'd better pipe all hands to table d'hote lunch!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" replied Tuggy. "There's two boxes of sardines and one tin of pineapple left, sir!"

"Then carry on," said the Commander.

VI

IN WHICH TOPSY THE TERRIBLE TANK, FLUSHED WITH THE SUCCESS OF HER PRELIMINARY PREAMBLE, PERPETRATES FURTHER REMARKABLE ADVENTURES AMID THE STRONGHOLDS OF THE ENEMY. OF THE DEPLORABLE MADNESS OF JIMMY, AND HOW HE RUNS AWAY. HOW TOPSY IS LURED TO DESTRUCTION AND SUICIDE; AND OF THE EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW OF HER CREW WITH THE KAISER AND COUNT ZEPPELIN.

THROUGH the dust and the smoke of interminable battle, Topsy set off to crown her conquests by further flood and remoter field. The greyhound of the Fleet, she soon left all the other cruisers behind. In half-an-hour the topmasts of Tiddleywinks had sunk below the horizon; even the honk-honk of friendly hooters had died down and ceased to be. Silence — pre-Creational silence — brooded over the stricken land.

Every mouth-organ was mute.

Alone, but unafraid, Topsy the Irresistible, pursued her way, avoiding the main battle area by bearing off three points on the weather bow. None stayed to ask her business or to demand her papers. Her pirate cruise was uninterrupted and halcyon. A peaceful lunch was served in the main saloon. The Commander refused the soup, because, he said, it tasted of hair oil. Otherwise the meal was fairly satisfactory, in spite of the fact that there was nothing to drink but Benedictine, served in tin tea cups out of a Worcester sauce bottle. James, the engine, was allowed to rest whilst the banquet (consisting mainly of sardines and raspberry jam) was trifled with. There followed some slight misunderstanding

between him and the chief engineer, with the result that Jimmy became suddenly and violently angry—and ran away, with the bit between his teeth.

Luckily, there was a straight run ahead for Jimmy's maniac antics. Mr. Hardy lugged over the lever which controlled the band-brake. But the Benedictine and the sardines had braced his muscles to such an extent that the band snapped, and as the course was down-hill, there was nothing for it but to give Topsy her head.

At the bottom of the slope there were four cross-roads, hedged by a tangle of barbed wire, behind which a German guard of a dozen men sat round a machine-gun emplacement. In their midst a fire smoked invitingly, and an aromatic waft of cooking tickled the nostrils of Commander Jenkins as he ran Topsy smack into the midst of this unsuspecting family party. Topsy walked through the wire as if it were worsted, and before the Prussian gunners could turn their armoury upon her, she was on it and over it. The captain of the gun-crew leaped back, poising a bomb to fling at the oncoming Mastodon. Tuggy Sparrow, presiding over the destinies of the wire-clippers, saw the movement. He pressed the spring, and with a horrid snarl Topsy snapped like a hungry pike. The first clash of the frightful scissors bit nothing but air; the second caught the German's arm just below the wrist and sheared off his hand with a cut as clean as a razor. He dropped, howling, right in the wake of the Juggernaut, which passed complacently over him, rolling him out like pastry.

"Good!" cried the Commander over his shoulder. "Where did you learn that trick, my lad?"

"It was a hinspiration, sir," replied Tuggy. "My father, sir, was foreman cutter to the well-known tailorin' firm of Snip and Klippetts, of Limehouse Reach!"

"Well—you did that customer in, top-hole. Cut him out and ironed him with a proper professional touch, Tuggy. A tailor in a Tank—Hullo! What's up now? My word, we *are* travellin'! The London, Chatham and Dover isn't in it with this circus!"

Topsy had suddenly taken a new turn of speed. "We're running off the blessed chart!" cried Mr. Jenkins. "Wo! Emma."

But Emma wouldn't "Wo." Instead of taking the curve of the road, though the Commander jammed the wheel round hard, Topsy ran straight on, crashed through a wall, walked—or rather romped—through a deserted farm-yard, climbed over a haystack and through a squelching manure-heap, swam a pond, pushed a tall tree over as easily as a runaway motor-bus gobbles up a lamp-post, struck the main road again, and presently ran into the main street of a neat little village, every house of which was crowded with spectators, who greeted Topsy with guttural cheers.

The spectators, and the cheers, were—German.

Across the street a gay banner was stretched. Upon it, in large letters, were the words,

WELCOME TO THE TANKS!

"My aunt!" cried the Commander. "Is this the ninth of November, and am I the Lord Mayor's coachman, or do my eyes deceive me?"

They did. The village green was just ahead. Upon it had been erected a tall tower of steel surmounted by the Prussian flag. Around and about were grouped a crowd of officers in brilliant uniforms. They stepped back politely and saluted as Topsy rumbled up and came to a sudden stop under the very shadow of the mysterious tower. A moment before she had been furious as a famished jaguar. Now she

was as amiable as a lamb chop reposing in a dressing of parsley. All the fight had gone out of her. There she sat, panting and palpitating—the very image of despondent and dejected maidenhood. Commander Jenkins took a survey of the situation through the spyhole in the conning tower. Then he piped all hands to the quarter deck, lit a cigarette, and bade the crew surrender.

"We've bitten off a little more than we can chew," said he. "Good-bye, Topsy, old lady. You've earnt your little bit of corn, and all you've got to do now is to show this handsome-hatted horde of Huns how—" his voice trembled for an instant—"how a British Tank can die in the hey-day of her budding womanhood. Farewell!—and if for ever . . ."

Looking like disreputable Jonahs after a week of whale hospitality, the Commander, Mr. Hardy and Tuggy Sparrow crawled out of the Tank, and approached the glittering throng assembled on the village green. Standing a little aloof from the multitude was a shortish man with a steel-blue cloak wrapped around his drooping figure. A string of Iron Crosses stretched from shoulder to shoulder, and under them innumerable stars and other decorations blazed. His withered left hand rested upon the golden hilt of his sword, and in his attitude there was a mixture of Napoleon, Hannibal, Julius Cæsar, and Charles Peace, which, properly sorted out and classified, suggested that here, indeed, was a personage of note.

Harshly, but with a tone of infinite weariness, he spoke to the British prisoners standing before him.

"I am the Kaiser," he said, "and here"—he beckoned to a fat old gentleman in the background—"is the man who by his aerial wonder-works has reduced London to ashes, and who has completely destroyed Woolwich Arsenal,

Buckingham Palace, and Madame Tussaud's six times. Allow me to introduce you—Count Zeppelin—Commander—Commander—I'm afraid I didn't quite catch your name, Sir."

"Jenkins, your majesty," said Topsy's skipper, with a bow. "And allow me, in turn, to present to you Rear-Admiral Collingwood Nelson Camperdown Hardy, V.C., X.Y.Z., and Brigadier-General Thomas Theophilus Tugville Sparrow, K.C.B., M.V.O., C.O."

"Ach!" murmured the Kaiser. "In happier times I should have been delighted to honour such a distinguished company. But war—as you are doubtless aware—is Hell; and business is business." He wiped his weary face with a purple silk handkerchief.

"We are assembled here to-day, gentlemen," he went on, "for the purpose of circumventing English frightfulness, which has soared to the indescribable limit in the production of monstrosities as unsportsmanlike as they are inhuman—to wit—Tanks. Fortunately—I say 'fortunately' advisedly, gentlemen—I have many influential friends in England, and from them I heard of these hobgoblin horrors, not early enough to produce similar engines of destruction, but in time to get my learned and distinguished friend and scientist, Herr Pumpelschiffner, to erect and equip at various points throughout this wilderness, which was once fair Flanders, those giant towers of steel, one of which you see before you, gentlemen. Each tower is fitted with a giant magnet of 10,663⅞ h.-p., possessing a current so powerful that any tank within two miles is impelled to the spot.

"The strongest tower of all was erected here on this peaceful village green; and here I hastened with the courageous and gallant Count to be on the spot at the first capture. The Count cannot only produce Zeppelins; he can, with the assistance of a survey of the interior economy of the creation

we see shackled and shamed before us, produce a super-Tank of ten-fold ferocity."

The Kaiser turned to Count Zeppelin and waved his withered hand in the direction of Topsy. "And that's your little job to-day, Zep.," he said, *sotto voce.*

The Count said nothing, but producing a small packet of acid drops from his pocket, took one himself, and then, with characteristic Hun politeness, handed them round.

Addressing himself to Commander Jenkins, the Emperor said, "I command you to conduct Count Zeppelin over the works, and to explain at length to him all the secrets of the dreadful beast now crouched and conquered before Us!"

"I cannot say 'with pleasure,'" replied Mr. Jenkins, "but with obedience, your majesty." He bowed again.

"But before we proceed" (he shot a warning glance at his two companions), "may I be permitted just to have a preliminary look round the ship, so as to prepare her for the distinguished visitor?"

"By all means," answered the unsuspecting Kaiser. "Anything to make the dear Count's work easier."

"Then, Count," said the Commander, "I will first hand to you a small packet, which will be of absorbing interest to you, if I may be allowed?"

The Count clicked his heels and bowed again as Commander Jenkins produced from his breast pocket a small envelope, tied with pink ribbon, and handed it to the grizzled old gentleman.

"Tank you," said Count Zeppelin, so politely that nobody dared smile at the pun.

* * * * *

"Good-bye, boys," whispered Commander Jenkins. "If ever you get back to Blighty, remember me to the crowd."

There was a happy little smile on the face of the brave commander as he stepped off lightly and disappeared with an elegant wriggle, inside Topsy.

Side by side, the Kaiser and the Count walked slowly away to commune in secret. The crowd moved back reverently at their coming. They had not gone a dozen yards when there was a frightful, shattering roar. In a mighty explosion, Topsy and the tower, the village green, and all the surroundings disappeared in a blinding cataclysm . . . and Commander Jenkins, D.S.O., went up with his ship.

* * * * *

The Count and the Kaiser found themselves sitting opposite one another, unharmed but shaken, amid the dust and the ashes of the explosion.

"Donnerblitzensmother!" cried his majesty. "The desperate Englishman has us in the eye done. He has blown up der Tank!"

"Und himself has!" replied the Count. "But I still his secret haf perhaps here in this little envelope, which to me himself he handed did. I will it open, and we shall see!"

He tore apart the envelope and extracted from it a little scrap of twisted aluminium. A label was attached to it, and written thereon were the words—

Zepp. relic from the Cuffley airship strafed by Lieut. Robinson, V.C. September 3rd, 1916.

The Count and the Kaiser gazed meaningly at one another. Then the Count carefully folded up the relic and placed it back in the envelope.

"Ach!" said he. "These mad English will their little joke haf!"

THE RAT BRIGADE.

THE RAT BRIGADE.

I.—THE MELODIOUS BLACKSMITH.

RAKE o' FLAZE has never been the same since Critty left for the wars.

Critty was the village blacksmith—the Admirable Crichton of the place. His forge was at the turn of the street; facing it was the Green, a triangular pleasaunce with a spreading chestnut tree at each corner, and the ancient stocks in the middle, around which a German band of six tubby, friendly old gentlemen used to play melancholy music until It happened, and they vanished into the misty Nowhere.

To tell the truth, we were rather sad at their going, for their music was the only kultur'd melody we ever had in Rake o' Flaze. It was not of the gay, Hamelin sort, but somewhat melancholy and furtive; and the dreamy-eyed old *virtuoso* who played the clarionet had a quaint touch of magic in his artistry which used to charm the children out of school: they would lie entranced under the trees, quiet as mice, to listen to him. There was something elfin about it; I verily believe that this obese and bald and ancient musician had met Pan in his wanderings through Solem Wood near by and had stolen some of his harmonious secrets. . . . But now, alas! he and the rest of his tuneful companions have gone for ever, over the hills and far away . . .

Critty came beautifully to the rescue, as he always did when our tiny village had a crisis to face. As a blacksmith he was pre-eminent. The shine of his forge and the roar of his bellows were famous as far as the county town, seven miles away. The smash of his fist was only second to the swing of his great hammer. He had felled an ox with it. His Atlas shoulders were so vast that he carried the whole village easily upon them. His face was mahogany brown; his hair black and stiff like curled wire; his eye soft as a woman's, and his smile a benediction. Of a Saturday night, when the forge was damped down, Critty, stripped to his splendid waist, would clean himself at the pump, hissing like a great steam-engine, and prepare for his work in the tiled kitchen, where he would cut the hair and shave the wheat-stubble chins of the entire hamlet, for he was barber as well as blacksmith.

Though soaped and scrubbed so scrupulously, and clothed in a wide white apron, the scent of Vulcan clung to him still; no amount of polishing-up could rid him of that healthy aroma which suggested to those who approached him that he had been singed all over. On Sundays he would play the harmonium in the small Baptist chapel. One of Nature's melodists, he played entirely by ear, but his touch was sure and tender, and the wheezy old harmonium, booming under the knee-swell, might well imagine itself a grand organ under Critty's wizardry. Music was his sweetheart. He was the only man I ever knew who, when a violin was first placed in his hands, managed to wheedle a tune out of it.

And so it was that when war had quenched the German band, and Rake o' Flaze was muted to sadness, the great inspiration came to Critty to establish the Rake o' Flaze Brass Band. The scheme prospered. Subscriptions rolled up, and even the vicar—a somewhat dour man with a soul

not altogether attuned to harmony—agreed to contribute his mite, and suggested a psaltery, as something Biblical and soothing. It was Israelitish, perhaps, but safe; and his reverence sent to the Stores for one. The Stores replied gravely as follows:—

"Dear Sir,—We are in receipt of your esteemed order for a psaltery, but we much regret to inform you that we do not stock such an instrument, nor can we find, after making exhaustive enquiries, any firm which deals in the same, psalteries having been out of demand for the last nine hundred years. But we can do you a very cheap line in second-hand triangles, one of which we beg to enclose as a sample.

We beg to remain,

Your obedient Servants, etc."

As a nucleus, the triangle was presented; and presently around it gathered a cornet, a euphonium, a saxhorn, and a trombone, Critty being rather relieved than otherwise to find that there had been nothing doing in psalteries, of the management of which even he was entirely ignorant. The instruments were carefully distributed, and presently, to its great joy, Rake o' Flaze awoke once more to the realities of music within its precincts. By the time the battle of the Marne had been fought, the Rake o' Flaze Brass Band had so far progressed as to be able to produce something like a simple hymn tune with not more than twelve glaring errors in *Peace, perfect peace.* The National Anthem, too, was here and there reminiscent of the actual thing, though "London" Mehew (so called because he had been once in his life to London and lost his watch there), to whom was entrusted the bass part upon the euphonium, dealt with it so originally that Critty exhorted him to practise diligently the

part in private before the next band meeting. "London" obeyed, anxious to do his best for his King and village, and on the following Sunday morning the constable, alarmed by strange sounds proceeding from the bedroom of Mr. Mehew's private residence, knocked at the door and inquired what was wrong with the pigs.

Mr. Mehew showed a very red face out of his window. "It's all right, Mr. Nayler," he said, "it's only me a-rastlin' with the demon o' them low notes."

"Sorry to have disturbed you," replied the policeman, "but if you will take a little private advice, as man to man, Mr. Mehew, I'd advise you to wear a pair of spectacles, or them eyes o' yourn'll be droppin' out! There's an oncommon bulge about 'em!"

The demon having been conquered all went merrily with the band under Critty's triumphant generalship, and its trial performance on the Green was a proud day for Rake o' Flaze. The village was itself again. Then one sad evening a never-to-be-forgotten meeting of the parish council dashed all our hope to the ground. The business on the agenda was completed, when Mr. Starmer (the chairman, a masterful man and landlord of the Axe and Compasses) arose on a point of order and declared that Rake o' Flaze, hitherto unrepresented on the far-flung field of Armageddon, should send somebody to the War. From what he had heard it was clearly time that something should be done—(unanimous assent)—and that Rake o' Flaze should do it before it was too late. By unanimous vote of the council, after a prolonged and animated discussion, Critty was selected to go out and to deal with the Hosts of Midian.

"And now, gentlemen, we shall soon know what's what with Critty there," said Mr. Starmer, as he shook hands with the blacksmith, and wished him luck. "With your goin',

Christopher, me lad, Rake o' Flaze will have got a nasty one, smack in the wind, so to say! But it's got to be done!"

And so Critty went off to the wars.

II.—EMMANUEL.

On the windy crest of Mark's Hill, with our tiny hamlet winking far below, we would stand at night when the prayer-meeting was over, and search the radiant heavens for signs and portents. In majesty above us rode the splendid stars. We could almost hear, in imagination, the music of the Milky Way, and feel the swing of the world as it spun. But save for the occasional lightning-streak of a falling star the sky was calm and untroubled—and so were we. Universal tumult might rage and snarl, but we were so far away from it all in this quiet sanctuary of middle England that it reached us only as a tale that is told. God was in his Heaven: all was right with our little world—the world of Rake o' Flaze.

We would think of Critty, our champion, and wonder where he was and what he was doing out in the "Somewhere" we used to read of in the newspapers. It all seemed a dream, somehow, out of which we should presently awake to hear the roar of the now silent forge, to see the sparks flying again, and our black-haired Vulcan making ringing music under the swing of his great hammer, with his eyes ashine in the glow, and the light making play with his knotted muscles.

But regularly every Sunday morning we would be brought face to face with the realities—in the Baptist Chapel, under the fervid sway of the Rev. Emmanuel Ekins. A little wisp

of a man was the Rev. Emmanuel, with a huge head, attached to a frame so slender that the veins of his neck stood out as a permanent protest against the carrying of such a weight. His eyes glowed like a live coal, his long upper lip was blue and close shaven, and the besom sweep of his black beard made up for the lack of verdure on his head, which was entirely bald. His voice was deep and threatening, and when he loosed the floodgates of his wrath against the Evil One—"Down—Satan—*Down!*" his Infernal Majesty, recognising that he had no chance with Emmanuel at the top of his form, discreetly retired from the competition to bide his time. But now our rare minister has given the Devil a much-needed and well-earned rest—for the period of the war.

"I will deal with *you* later on, my friend!" says he, and every Sabbath morn he assumes the rôle of a sort of rural and reverend Garvin—with a little closer attention to facts, perhaps, but with a wonderful grip of the essentials.

Thus the war became real to us; it was a part of the life and the breath of our little village, because we had given our champion to it, and he was fighting it for us. Our beloved old minister's war sermons—simple little things in their way, but direct, picturesque, and delivered in good and honest Saxon, spicily flavoured with our own homely Huntingdonshire *patois*—became a rich treat in store for every week-end. There was no nodding in the pews when Emmanuel was up and doing in the small pinewood pulpit under the swinging paraffin lamp chained to the ceiling; and there were few vacant pews, for the fame of the little man spread far across the countryside, and farmers and their wives would drive into Rake o' Flaze from all around to hear Mr. Ekins's masterly Sunday morning analysis of Armageddon—"a rar' wunnerful mouthful of a word, that there Armygeddin!" His word was law; his very phrases were quoted in such

unexpected places as St. Ives Cattle Market and even Godmanchester Fair. The newspapers were a little complicated for our honest sons of the plough and stubble to get a grip of in the small time they allowed themselves for literary studies. So they fell back upon Emmanuel.

"Mornin', Mr. Tappin! An' how's the old black oog (hog) to-day? Mendin', I trust, Mr. Tappin—mendin'? She's loike the war, she is—a 'tarnal time in gettin' round! Thay *do* say, Mr. Tappin, that that there Kayser——"

"Naay, George; that there's all a twizzle o' make-up; an' don't you believe it! Mr. Ekins, he *do* saay——"

And that settled it.

The Rev. Emmanuel rounded up the slackers, just as he rounded up "that there Kayser." First of all he persuaded his deacon, Mr. Wanks, the very mild and tow-haired manager of the general store, to become, much to his amazement, a man of war, and to go out and help Critty to carry the banner of Rake o' Flaze triumphant. Before this Mr. Wanks had always looked upon his bacon knife with a certain amount of trepidation, slicing his rashers with an apologetic air. He departed in a blaze of glory, and as the Rake o' Flaze Brass Band played him out of the village he felt like Alexander.

There followed, one by one, the young yokels who used to prop up the churchyard wall after morning service and before dinner. And, after them, the four gipsy sons of that handsome, black-eyed old rascal, Tom Farr—the rich, retired horse borrower, who, though he lived in as fine a gabled farmhouse as any man could wish for, never slept in a bed, but preferred, for old association's sake, the straw of the tithe barn and the rustling fellowship of the rats. Willingly would Gabriel the sexton have gone; but he was too old and squeaky about the limbs, and near blind.

" What about them there trenches I've heered tell on ? " said Gabriel, when the sad news was broken to him that he was a trifle too old at sixty for active service. " Sure-ly I could do a bit at that, for I'm a wunnerful rar' hand at the spade. An' then, Mr. Ekins, sir, theer's the graves ! I'll be thinkin' theer's many a poor lad out theer in sad needs of decent burial ; an' no born man was more slicker at the six-foot than Gabe ! Theer's doubtless a younger and more onexperienced 'un as'd only be too pleased for me to take on his job, and him free to have a go at them theer Huns. An' grave-diggin's dreery business for the young—it ain't natcheral-like, sir ! "

" Nay, nay, old friend, you must stay at home ! " said the Minister, with his hand on the old sexton's shoulder.

" But if they was to jigger me up, Mr. Ekins, what'd it matter ? Nobody'd miss an old chap like me, sir ! "

" Nobody would miss *you* ? Why, bless my soul ! " declared the Rev. Emmanuel, " what would the band do if you were to go ? Who in the wide, wide world could take your place as first trombonist ? No ! You must stay behind, Gabriel, and cheer us up. God knows we shall want it badly enough, for all the boys have gone ! "

In the little pinewood pulpit under the chained paraffin lamp, the Rev. Emmanuel gazed down upon his congregation —a congregation of eld, with the morning sun ashine amid their silver hairs. He looked into the eyes of these old folk. They were gazing far, far away, wistful and sad. He knew for what they were searching ; he was content. He opened the old Bristol Tune Book and in a deep voice gave out the hymn : " Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow ! "

III.—THE HOMECOMING OF CRITTY.

MANY weary months passed. There was no news of our valorous village blacksmith. One communication had come from him and one only—just a printed field post card, announcing the glad tidings, "I am well." Then silence profound. Rake o' Flaze began to talk of Critty in the past tense, as a kind of glorious Apollo shrouded in immemorial mists. They might have visualised him as a modern Achilles sulking in his dug-out had they known. But they did not know, and Achilles was—well, Greek to them.

In course of time Mr. Wanks came back, as he departed, in a cloud of glory, with a cloven foot, and wonderful tales of a war which was surely past all understanding. The band gave him "See, the conquering hero"; he was petted and fussed; a glamorous grocer if there ever was one. To him, at all events that sardonic old French proverb, "*Né homme, mort épicier*," would never apply. He was the embodiment of the exact opposite—born a grocer, to die (when the time came) a Man! The bacon knife had no terrors for him now. With each rasher he sliced, savagely, a Hun.

Through all this and more to come Miss Lucy Wetters, the schoolmistress, lived in a dream. Hers had been a dull life; but for Critty it would have been tragedy—a bitter existence—with her gentle heart corroding under the biting acid of elementary education. Critty was her star; she worshipped him as a hero of ten thousand fights, and longed for the golden hour to strike when—ah, when? Lucy was not beautiful. She was angular, like her handwriting. Her knuckles were bony and red from continual rapping upon adamant little skulls. She was flat-chested and somewhat frail, and she wore spectacles. They were of gold—and so was her heart, refined in the fire of splendid romance. She

treasured a beautiful secret there. On the night of his leaving, under the stars, Critty had kissed her. . . . Patiently she awaited his homecoming, for she knew, with the instinct of a woman and a lover, that he would come. She never felt fear. Her dreams were untroubled; into them sometimes there would steal a smiling face, with kind eyes and that look she knew so well —his! In her waking hours, when leisure was hers, she prepared her mind for the great day. Abandoning the pacific rhymes of Mrs. Hemans, she fed upon the sterner muse, reading "Othello," and fancying herself Desdemona sitting rapt, breathless, at the feet of the dusky Moor. . . Critty. . .

And so the days passed. Two of the Farr boys would never come back. Dead and buried they lie in the dismal swamp which was once fair Flanders; but they will never be forgotten in Rake o' Flaze. The roll of honour affixed to the church door testifies to their valour; the band has played, with fine feeling, the "Dead March" in *Saul*, with old man Farr standing up stiff and fierce at the service, and his eyes flashing proudly through the tears—a fine figure of a robber chief, in spite of his homespun mourning and the starched collar gripping his brown throat.

"Jim, lad!" says he to his youngest. "'Tis time *you* went an' all. An' lad—looke theer at Sexton Gabe a' givin' the 'Dead March' billy-o! Fair diggin' the music out, he be! What a day—*what* a day, too be-e sure!"

* * * * *

Last Tuesday evening the great event happened. It was prayer-meeting night in the little chapel schoolroom. For real, human stuff, somehow, the Established Church does not count for much in Rake o' Flaze. It is too formal, too Established—lacking the hot atmosphere of proper holiness.

It does not lean to extempore flashes such as the rural mind revels in. Brother Heritage, of the R.A.O.B., who dropped in once, "just to see, like," and being quite open to conviction, declared that it was "rather like calling on t' squire on one of his cold mutton mornin's, and not homely enew for he. He wanted rousifyin' "—so he joined the Baptists, and became, to use his own phrase, a Pillow of the Church. He was a good man and true, sound to the core; and he led the meeting in prayer with a fine flow of native eloquence, adopting a personal, confidential tone in addressing the Almighty which would cause consternation in the Establishment.

On the night of nights, when Critty came back, Brother Heritage was in command of the situation. In the middle of a long and earnest prayer our esteemed brother (as was his invariable custom) opened his eyes for an instant, and saw the blacksmith slip quietly into the room at the back. Critty was in khaki; he was pale and thin, and in place of that splendid right arm, the pride and terror of the countryside, there dangled an empty sleeve! For a moment the shock of the sight paralysed the old man; he stood speechless and blinking. But presently the flow came back, and, flinging his head back and his arms out, he cried: "O Lord, we thank Thee for the safe return of Thy servant Christopher; but—a rar' immortal mess Thou'st made o' him, O Lord!"

* * * * *

Unlike the glorious grocer when he returned from the wars, Critty was strangely silent as to his deeds. He bore with stoicism the loss of his wonderful arm, but he never spoke of the battle in which he had been disabled, nor explained how it had happened, declaring that there was plenty of ginger, anyway, in the one which remained. There was a good

working percentage of him back; and Rake o' Flaze rejoiced accordingly.

Again and again he was asked the meaning of the little badge he wore, with the letters O.R.S.C. upon it. But he would never tell, until one calm night, under the listening stars, Lucy, with all the craft of Delilah, wheedled it out of him.

"If you *must* know," he said, with his left arm around her willing waist, "them letters stand for my job, dear—'Official Rat-catcher of the Sanitary Corps'! That there was my job, Lucy. . . . Hundreds and thousands of 'em I catched; until I growed sort of careless-like, an' one of 'em bit me in the hand. It pisoned my arm; and I had to have it cut off. You needn't tell . . . 'Twas a monstrous great rat, Lucy . . ."

"Critty, dear, I know—I know—it *must* have been!" she whispered softly.

And she kissed him again under the stars. A noble woman!

BEELZEBUB.

"TALKIN' of rats . . ." said Mr. William Bailey, V.C., looking up with a cherubic smile from his soft pillows (he was really wounded this time).

"Talkin' of them interestin' and intelligent animals, I can tell you a little bit o' gorspel which you can believe or not, just as you like, sir.

"I don't know exactly how it all happened," said William, "but me an' old Pinky were in this particular jamboree. Bein' pipped in the off-hind, and not bein' nippy enough to scoot when the whistle sounded the glad and gallant 'Retreat,' and likewise bein' of an enterprisin' and scientific turn o' mind, they gave me a highly-paid post—I don't think!—in the Sanitary Corpse—dustman, sweeper, fly-flapper, insec'-nabber, etcetera.

"But chiefest of all my little specialities was my app'intment as royal an' right 'onourable rat-rooster to the British Army. That was O.K., and—pheugh!—I can smell it now!"

Mr. Bailey lit a Woodbine, meditatively, and took in a great draught of the smoke—"just to take the taste out o' my swallower."

Then he continued his story.

"We was livin' at the time in sets of palatial apartments underground, and furnished on the easy-payment system; hot an' cold water laid on—'specially cold—bath-rooms,

lavatories, and boodwores, just like home—only home without a mother. Next door, so to speak, was the German palaces an' shootin'-boxes, somewhat similar, but more elaborate-like, and deeper down.

"Our major, who was a particular sort of gent, couldn't sleep because of the rats, which used to drop in as soon as his electric light was switched off. They wasn't ordinary rats, but very near as big as grey'ounds, and too familiar for anything. He swore they used to sit up at the foot of his bed, waggle their long whiskers, and jabber at 'im.

" There was one beast he christened Beelzebub—about the size of a smallish elephant, and the father of the family—and after about ten days of old Bub's regular calls, the major calls up the O.R.S.C.—that's me, ' Official Rat-catcher to the Sanitary Corpse '—and gives me twenty-four hours to catch Beelzebub, and to clear out his wigwam of the rest of 'em.

" Well, to cut a long story short, I nabs old Beelzebub in a tricksy trap, made out of an empty tomarter-tin, and baited with half a pound of best margarine—which seemed a shockin' waste to be throwed away on a rat—and hands the tin and my squakin', cussin' prisoner o' war to the major, who gives me a five-franc note.

" ' Bailey,' he says, ' you're a lad ! Tie a bit o' cord to the beggar's leg,' he says, ' let 'im loose, keep hold o' one end o' the string,' he says, ' and foller 'im 'ome to where all the other blighters live. Give 'em jip—here's a couple of pounds of poisoned margarine—and come an' report to me when you've completed the wholesale decimation, and there'll be another five-franc note for you, Mr. Lucretia Borgia ! ' he says. ' An' now, hoppit ! '

" So I hoptit," continued Mr. Bailey ; " an' me an' Pinky harnessed up Beelzebub between us with a long bit o' whipcord

borrered from the A.S.C. gasworks—the rat havin' nipt a bit out o' my thumb to signify his interest in the proceedin's—and off we set on the long trail, with old Pinky sort o' huntsman an' whipper-in.

" Lor', what a chase old Bubby led us ! Doubled like a crafty old hare, he did, until we was both fair blowed. In a hower or so—maybe more—Bubby went to earth down a sort o' mine-crater, and us after 'im, me still hangin' on to the reins. And then—strike me purply pink all over—if we didn't find ourselves, hot with the bloomin' chase, slap in the middle of a sort o' vault—a German dug-out it was—plump among the Rat Reserve A.S.C. of the Prussian 'osts !

" It was a big cave, all lit up an' sparkly, like an underground pub ; but instead o' barrels o' beer round the walls, there was scores an' scores of wire cages, labelled like a Lord George Sanger menagerie, an' every cage stuffed full of more fat, fierce rats than the worst case of D.T.'s ever dreamt of !

" I says to old Pinky, I says : ' Have I got 'em again, Pinky ? Are they rats, or are they only thingamy-wobblers ? '

" ' Can you see 'em, too, Bill ? ' says Pinky, in an 'oarse kind o' whisper. ' Thank you for them words, William ! Then they ***are*** rats, after all ! '

" Then, somehow or other, old Beelzebub broke away, and, with a yelp of joy, scampered up to an old gent who we hadn't twigged afore. He was very fat and German, with a big, bald, wicked old nut on 'im, and goggle spectacles what made his sinful eyes look like sorcers.

" He was squattin' up in a corner o' the cave, with lots of bottles an' glass tubes round 'im, and a rat—near as big and fierce as Beelzebub—strapped down on an operatin'-table before 'im. An' he was squirtin' stuff out o' one o' them

glass tubes into the pore bloomin' rat tied up there under 'is snitch, an' the rat was sort o' whimperin' like a baby.

" ' Here, hands up, you vivisectin' old villain ! ' says Pinky. ' What the blazes are you doin' to one of Nature's innocent, four-legged creatures ? ' he says.

" The fat old sossidge, he looks up, quiet-like, and he says : ' Get out of my laboratory, you mad, interferin', blarsted Britisher,' he says, ' or I'll open all the cages an' let the whole pack loose on you ! Then you won't have a—— earthly ! ' he says, speaking polite English like a Christian.

" ' This here rat,' he goes on, still speakin' very quiet an' professional-like, ' is the seven hundred and ninety-fourth I've inoculated with the deadliest serum known to science ; and now that you've been kind enough to bring back Fritzy to me '—he pointed to Beelzebub—' I'm goin' to turn the whole lot loose into the British lines—strafe 'em—with Fritzy, who I've trained to the job, to lead 'em ! Just a nip from any one of 'em'll be enough ; and if the whole first line of be-strafed British trenches acrost the way don't swell up and bust, then my name ain't Dr. Spitzenhelder ! ' "

Mr. Bailey lit another cigarette, and smiled faintly at the remembrance.

" What happened next," he said, " was old Pinky's idea. He turns to me an' whispers : ' Give me the margarine-tin, Bill, quick ! We'll Spitzenhelder the old blighter with a dish out of his own menu ! Britons never will be slaves ! '

" An' he ups with the tin, an' scoops out a great slab of doctored margarine. ' Eat that, Mr. Bloomin' Dr. Crippen— every ounce of it ! ' he says, ' An 'eat it now, or I'll blow your nasty, stinkin' brains into the nearest rat-cage—so help me God, I will ! '

" And eat it the blighter had to—every scrap of it. The margarine by itself'd probably have cooked his goose, for

it was filthy muck; but the strychnine and the other little dollops of sudden death it was laced with would have laid out a bronze statue in two shakes of a duck's waggler—of which there's no shadder of earthly doubt whatever! We watched Dr. Spitzy turn blue, an' then green, and then ripe-tomarter-coloured; then we watched him start tyin' hisself into half-hitches an' slip-knots an' monkey-puzzlers. Then he started turnin' double-summersaults. An' presently he laid down, and passed away, quiet an' peaceful, though somewhat distended, to the New Jerusalem.

"Then, havin' made sure he was a goner, we set fire to the laboratory with a handy tin o' petrol we found lyin' about, roasted every blessed rat on the premises, an' hopped back home! *What* days for the workin' classes, eh? Since that experience I've always gorne slow at the sherry decanter an' the bubbly fountain. Seein' rats was never exactly in my line, but after that little up-and-downer with Beelzebub and Dr. Spitzenhelderstein my vision has been liable to playin' tricks——"

* * * * *

"And you got your five-franc note, Mr. Bailey?" I asked.

"You bet!" replied William. "An' somethin' else, too. What with that there pisen'd-rat job and the little matter o' them fifty odd prisoners I pinched—more by good luck than judgment—his gracious Majesty was pleased to signify the same with a little remembrance in bronze. I was all swelled up and like to die at any moment of that rat-bite at the time, but that little remembrance they passed along did more'n all the doctors' medicine in the world. It pulled Bill Bailey through—out of the jaws, so to speak. And here it is!"

He slipped his hand under his pillow, and drew therefrom the Victoria Cross, wrapped up in a greasy old five-franc note.

"You can't pop it," he said, rather sadly. "As metal, it's worth, I should say, about one-and-a-tanner; but as a soovenir of interestin' an' excitin' times along of old Pinky and the rest o' my pals, it's interestin'-like to keep handy, and look at now and then. What do you think—eh?"

THE TERRIFIED TRACTION ENGINE.

THE millionaire private soldier and I were sitting in a little estaminet trying to drown our sorrows in foaming beakers of red, rather vinegary, vin ordinaire, and exchanging experiences of this wonderful war. While we chatted, there entered to us, in the glow of the evening sunset, a strange figure of a man.

From his countenance you might have taken him for something between a sweep and a nigger minstrel. His eyes shone ogreishly through the caked coal-dust, and his teeth flashed white beneath his clipped moustache. He was the complete embodiment of fatigue, as he said hoarsely :

" If anybody wants the bloomin' thing, he can have it ! It's just round the corner, down the road. Warranted quiet to ride and drive, but a bit of a roarer. I'm sick to death of the darned thing ! "

Private Pinkerton looked up.

" Have a drink," said he, shoving across the vinegar bottle. " I'm afraid there's no business doing in horses here, old chap. Try the Cavalry Brigade at ——"

" It isn't an 'orse," replied the drooping man ; " it's a bloomin' traction engine, which I've been tryin' to lose ever since the battle of the Marne, and can't ! "

He took a long pull at the tall glass, and told us all about it.

Early in the war, so he said, he got a job, having been a driver of a tremendously fast 60 h.-p. Greyhound in the M.T., which, being interpreted, means Mechanical Transport. He was once one of the kings of the road, doing his fifty miles per hour without turning a hair or shaking a stud loose.

And Fate, and the British Army, flung him at one sorrowful toss upon the footplate of a self-contained, copper-bottomed, deliberate, invertebrate, Waggles & Smithson traction engine, load two tons, speed four miles per hour, and several other useful, solid accomplishments. He spent long, laborious days, and dark, desperate nights, in carrying bully-beef, blankets, jam, sardines, dubbin, chloride of lime, and tea to the brave boys in the trenches at never more, and often less, than four miles per hour.

Well, everything went deliberately and comfortably until it became suddenly necessary for General French to consolidate his line by moving back to ——. There had been hot fighting, and tremendous shelling from the Prussian batteries. And it so happened that at the very swing of the tide our tired friend and his faithful traction engine, fully loaded with respirators and raspberry jam, found themselves at the cross-roads between Nieppe and St. Vitus in a sudden and altogether unanticipated strategic movement to the rear.

The destination of the traction engine was St. Vitus, and, following the commanding point of the finger-post, the driver faithfully steered his course in that direction amid a sort of nightmare of shells, shrapnel, bullets, dismembered enemy aeroplanes, noise and smoke and smother.

For a long time he didn't seem to realise that he and his obedient engine were the only things in this mundane scheme that were moving towards St. Vitus. The entire British Army

appeared to be streaming by him and going the other way. A dusty-eyebrowed staff-officer rode up alongside.

"Where the hell are you going?" he asked.

"St. Vitus, sir, with raspberry jam and respirators," replied the driver, noting the red band on the officer's cap, and back-pedalling promptly out of respect to that danger signal.

"Fathead!" retorted the staff-officer. "Right about turn with your blessed steam roundabout—quick! The Germans are in St. Vitus!"

So the engine right-abouted as speedily as possible, and followed the line of the retreat.

"It was a sort of nightmare journey," said the drooping man, in his tired voice. "The whole bloomin' world seemed to be overtaking us—horses, guns, and foot, ammunition wagons, ambulance cars—everything, all disappearing in the swirl of dust ahead. Even the mule-train passed us. 'Get a move on to your old hot pertater can!' says the rear mule driver, as he passed. 'The bloomin' Boches are only a couple of miles behind!'

"Cheerful outlook for me and the engine—eh? The poor old beggar began to sweat and shiver. She'd got the needle pretty bad; I could feel her on the shake fore and aft, and I felt mortal sorry for her!

"'Buck up, old girl!' says I. And the old girl bucked up to her last ounce.

"The German bullets came whinin' round—we were last and lonesome on the road now, and night was coming on—and one of them hit her smack in the boiler, and she began to leak something painful. Bleeding to death she was as we crawled up a little hill, and then ran down it, at the very last gasp—ran down into a sort of twinkle of camp-fires, and the sizzle of fried bacon smellin' divine in the evenin' air.

"They may have been Huns—super-bloomin' Huns, for all I knew or cared; I was that done up and desperate. I saw in a sort of dream the narsty blue shine of a bay'nit, and I smelt just one whiff of Paradise with the lid off—otherwise some noble soldier fryin' ham, and possibly eggs. If you have lived on clinkers and coal-dust for the best part of a week, you'll know the sort of feelin' . . . I took a great sniff. It reminded me of the Old Kent Road of a Sunday morning. Then a voice belongin' to somewhere round about the bay'nit sings out, 'Halt! who goes there?'

"'Friend,' says I, in a sort of last dyin' speech and confession, 'friend!' says I, with a hollow goblin laugh. 'Traction-bloomin' Engine No. 696, with respirators and jam—and a hole in her biler!'

"'Pass, T.E. 696 with an 'ole in her biler,' says the voice; and at them glad words I could have fallen on the sentry's neck an' kissed him!"

BIRDS OF PARADISE.

BEING a religious sort of chap, and knowing several fancy names for the Nether Regions, Private Dooney, of the Twenty-second Fetter-lane Flycatchers, christened his section of the trench " Domdaniel."

And no wonder! If anything ever was Hell, this was the place—" Hell with the lid off and the bottom out," to borrow Mr. Dooney's own descriptive language, flung off regardless, between the bursting of the Black Marias, the Surly Sams and the Sossidges; the rolling thunder-clouds of asphyxiating gas, the frequent hail-showers of shrapnel, and several other disquieting accompaniments of war.

This particular trench was not much more than a rifle-shot off Hooge, near the shattered, obliterated city of Ypres; and it was a very interesting and enthralling trench, because it was so close to the German first line, that when Dooney sang soft little bits of Moody and Sankey at bedtime, it was even betting that one or other of the harmonious Huns across the way would join in—being Saxon and sanctimonious.

It was a trench, also, which encouraged wakefulness; it was scarcely policy to attempt a siesta there. It was shaped very like a huge capital V. The arm of the capital nearest the Germans—and it was appallingly near, too—was in the fond and faithful keeping of Dooney and his little lot—fifteen of the Twenty-second Flycatchers.

They were known as "The Almosts," because they had been almost wiped out on a remarkable number of occasions. But not quite.

The Bethnal Green Blue Dragons—which is not their real name; but that doesn't matter—occupied the other arm of the V, which passed by the pleasant name of "Paradise." They were pretty snug and comfortable in Paradise, out of the direct throb of war's alarms, being sheltered by the other arm of the V, but near enough to earthquake and eclipse to be able to take a lively interest in the proceedings.

On the other hand, the Almosts hardly had the leisure to die, so vastly busy were they. Their orders were to hold Domdaniel at any price; and they held it valiantly, and with splendid courage and confidence.

Their ammunition was running low; the overworked belt of their red-hot machine-gun jammed; but they didn't care. They scooped out the rich, juicy contents of their "bully" cans, crammed them with gunpowder and hob-nails, extracted from the boots of pals who had no further use for them, and hurled them at the Huns. So, merrily enough, they kept the kettle singing, holding Domdaniel according to directions, though the blistering heat of it seared their valiant fingers.

The Crown Prince—or one or other of the high-and-mighty Headquarter Huns, who appeared to be in charge of the proceedings across the way—was more than incensed at the amazing stand Domdaniel was making.

This enlightened commander had already tried the effects of poisoned chocolate, nicely wrapped up in tissue-paper, and tossed over into Domdaniel, "with compliments and good wishes to our brave foes." But the brave foe wasn't having any.

Three terrific attacks were planned, the first of which was heralded by a pause.

"Look out, chaps!" said Dooney to what remained of the fifteen faithful Almosts. "The blighters have got some little game on! Keep your optics skinned, all of you!"

Meanwhile, the blissful birds roosting behind in Paradise were tearing up slips of paper and scrawling strange words on them with the one pencil-stump left in the company.

In the pause between the crackle and the crash of conflict, the tuneful voice of Private Dooney could be heard carolling to the well-known air in the Bristol Tune Book—

"Oh, Paradise, Oh, Paradise!
'Tis weary waiting here . . ."

* * * * *

Thud! Boom! Whizz!

The first attack opened. The air darkened, turned blue, green, purple, yellow, with puce spots. The poison cloud—the cloud of Death—rolled up the terrible slope of Domdaniel. . . .

"Down, Almosts—down!" roared Dooney.

Fourteen sturdy hindquarters heaved up, like fourteen khaki mountains. The Almosts knew the game—the ostrich dodge. With their heads in a hole and their behinds sticking out on the landscape like Karoo kopjes, they *felt* fairly safe anyhow.

"Fix res-pi-ratorrs!"

The awful cloud passed on, in grim and tragic silence.

Out of it, from just behind the apex of the fateful triangle, the voice of Alf, of the Bethnal Green Blue Dragons, could be heard calling:

"Bill! Bill! Are you there?"

"Yus! I'm here!" replied Mr. Dooney, dragging off his

faithful respirator, and inhaling mighty breaths of more or less fresh air.

Bang! Wheeeeew! Crrash!

The second attack opened. Seventeen Marias, nineteen Johnsons, a round dozen of coal-boxes, and the contents of six over-fed, elephantine trench-mortars burst over the deep-burrowed defenders of Domdaniel.

Again, the same voice from Paradise.

"Bill—Bill, are you still there?"

"Yus!" replied Bill, looking round anxiously for two of his fingers, which he could have sworn had been there five minutes ago.

"Yus—still here, Alf!" He seemed a little surprised that he was.

The third attack opened. It wasn't an attack, rightly speaking; it was an earthquake. The enemy sappers had mined Domdaniel. Domdaniel rocked and swayed and tossed and shivered like a cockle-shell in a maelstrom. But Domdaniel still held.

Again that voice—the voice of Alf at the corner of Paradise, huskier than ever—anxious—imploring.

"Bill, Bill, are you *still* there?"

Mr. Dooney spat out four teeth, and replied:

"Yus, I am!" There was a note of annoyance—almost anger—in his tones as he said, with distinct emphasis: "Yus, I *am* here! What do you keep on askin' if I'm here for?"

"Because," replied the triumphant voice of the Bird of Paradise—"because I just drawed your name in a sweep!"

SURLY SAM.

THE hill to the ramparts affords as stiff a climb as any in France. High over the keep, almost caressing the clouds, when March many-weathers flings her shrapnel of sleet and snow upon the little city, the brave flag of France still flies.

The road climbs dizzily to the moat, and then swings to the right through a quiet square of ancient, latticed houses. A long arrow-head on a metal signpost points the way to Saint Omer.

Deeply scored, ploughed and furrowed with wheel-tracks is this hill-top road, for it is the highway to the "affairs" of the British Army. The sentries perched amid the battlements are so immersed in the incessant kaleidoscope that they might almost forget to watch the clouds for questing Taubes and Zeppelins; the householders in the Square spend most of the daylight hours on their balconies, from which they wave little Union Jacks and cry God-speed to the bronzed pilgrims of battle as they swing by.

The girls—most of them in black, poor souls!—toss bouquets, tied with bright ribbons, down to the laughing soldiers.

"Bon voyage! Bon voyage! Bon voyage, mes braves Tommees!"

And Tom-mee, who has learnt all the little graces and pirouettes of La Patrie since his investment of her two years ago, kisses his grubby fingers to Juliette on the balcony.

This evening, however, the show was annoyingly slack and uninspiring. It refused to pass.

"What has happened to the circus, Jules?" I asked.

"Ma foi, I cannot say," replied the garçon. "It hath refused to cirque. Is it that the British Army has suddenly ended?—the unending terminated?"

"C'est incroyable!" said I, in my best French.

"C'est impossible!" declared Jules. "But I will inquire for monsieur."

Forthwith he vanished to consult the Oracle which invariably supplies Jules with every kind of information. His Delphos is somewhere in the back yard, amid the learned hens who live there and lay the most delicious omelettes in the whole of the Pas de Calais.

He returned aglow and gesticulative.

"Monsieur," he said, and his eyes shone, "the traffic has all been diverted to make way for the passage of the most wonderful thing in all this wonderful war—more wonderful even than our own bonne bouche, the Soixante-quinze. Be patient, monsieur, and presently you shall see—and hear!"

Soon there came from down the hill a roar and a growl and a grumble. The earth shook. Sparks and smoke filled the evening air—thick, acrid smoke, such as came from the unstoppered bottle which imprisoned the terrible Genii in the African tale.

And then, through the shimmer emerged a Child's Hill and Cricklewood motor-'bus, lathered and plastered with the grey mud of Flanders, but a good, honest Cockney L.G.O.C. conveyance, in spite of all.

It pulled up panting in front of the courtyard; it turned out to be the wagon-lit of a crowd of the most cheery boys that ever stuffed their ears with cotton-wool—a gun-crew of our far-famed "Seaside Gunners." And behind them, in

a Tophet-whirl of smoke and smother, six of the biggest traction-engines the world has ever seen—Daimler motors of incredible haulage power, their hind wheel a full nine feet in diameter, two drivers, two steering-wheels, and two starting-handles, port and starboard, to each; a searchlight as big as a gasometer belted on to the sweating belly of the monster; and still further behind, hitched by a mighty anchor chain, six trolleys filled with strange, swaddled, shrouded truck.

"What in the name of all that's marvellous have you got there?" asked I of the six-foot-three sergeant who was coaxing the contraption along.

"Oh, just a little speciality of our own," replied the giant of war, with a pleasant grin. "Sam, sir—Surly Sam, in six bloomin' sections. In other words, the new ——inch Howitzer, which is goin' to give 'em what-for in the neighbourhood of ——. Would you like to see Samuel's little box of pills? Little lots of all-right, they are, I'll give you my word. They're down the road there. And old Sam's only one of three.

"Our fam'ly's a fam'ly of triplets. There's Sam, Mary, and Martha. Mary and Martha have just gone along to ring those chimin' bells, as the nigger song says. The La Bassée Pets, they are, and no mistake. They're roarin' infants, they are, and their happy parients, the S.G.'s, have already sent in their brief to Buckingham Palace for the King's Bounty for the little darlin's!"

He lit a Woodbine at a tinder-box big enough to set fire to a city, and went on:

"You know, sir, we badly wanted this chime o' bells to ring in Kaiser Bill's birthday party; but as we couldn't get 'em up in time, we supplied the deficiency with a salute of twenty-one of the best six-inch how'tzers, and blew their trenches to blazes! If only Surly Sam'd been there then!

My word, what a picnic! But, anyway, here he is now, bless his heart; and if you'd like to wet his head, sir, I won't say no to the christenin'!"

And, as the obliging Jules came along at that very moment, the ceremony was performed with grave and fitting solemnity. We drank the health of Sam, Mary, and Martha three times three, until the violet bottle of precious "mélange" stood on its head.

"Alas!" I said, as the final drop fell into the slim glass of the thirsty sergeant. "Is there no more nectar, Jules, for this glorious occasion?"

"I will inquire for m'sieur," said Jules.

AT THE END OF THE DAY.

It is twelve hours' journey, just now, from the battered, slushy trenches behind the sand dunes in the north to the great shed at the rail-head known as the Hospital Clearing House.

After midnight has struck and all is quiet without, the business of the day being over, we sit expectantly under the soft glow of the lowered lights with our fingers literally on the pulse of the war. This way or that the fighting is raging, a day's march away; yet we know it all, and the drift of it.

It is an eerie sensation—the whisper of war. It comes to us in little trickles of sound over a thin wire—the telephone wire from the trenches.

This Clearing House is a wonderful place. It was once an engine-shed; now all the rolling-stock has been banished from it; it has been cleaned and polished, warmed and well ventilated, laid out with beds, a canteen, a little operating theatre, a lounge for the quiet, nimble-fingered sisters, and many other contrivances for the easing of pain and the comfort of the shattered fighting men who are brought in out of the tumult.

Speedily, and with great dexterity, these poor fellows are, after their preliminary "treatment," sorted out under "case headings" and despatched to the great hospitals either here in France or at home.

Many long hours have I spent here, watching Life and Death at close grips. It is not all grim work, or ghastly work. There are many off hours when, the day's labour being over, and the great Red Cross vans have whirled off with their loads, we turn our minds and our small talents to the entertainment of the wounded who are left behind to rest.

Such was the occasion the other evening. It had been a day of wild, furious wind and rain, with little fighting amid the muddy trenches, and consequently a slack time with us. So we gave the patients remaining in the shed a simple little concert, such as soldiers love.

In the very midst of it—a pretty nurse was singing "The Shepherd's Cradle Song," and crooning it very charmingly—a little b-r-r-r-r-r of sound came from the telephone-room, and one of the doctors slipped off, beckoning me to follow him.

There was nothing in the apartment save the telephone on a little table, a large map of the war area on the wall just above it, and a couple of chairs. We sat down, clamped the double ear-pieces to our heads, and waited.

Presently a tiny little voice trembled over the wire.

"Is that you, C. H.?"

"Right-o! Go ahead!" (from the doctor). "What's the trouble now?"

"At it again, doc., hammer and tongs—hell and fury! Can you clear for, say, a couple of hundred? Shell and shrapnel, mostly. Coming in hand over fist. Our little field hospital behind the firing-line working double tides. Ambulance train packing-up; she'll be ready to start in an hour, if it's all O.K. with you down there."

"Right!" says the doctor. "Carry on! We'll be all

snug and proper for you! By the way, where are you speaking from?"

"A dashed hot call office, old chap! Observation trench No. 16, smack in the middle of it. Roof shot away. Secondary telephone all smithereens. Only one wire working, and Heaven knows how long that'll hold! Lord, man, can't you hear it?"

"Never a sound!" says the doctor.

"Then hang on tight for a bit. Listen hard, and I'll give you the office when the next Johnson comes along."

We waited. Never a sound for ever so long, but the high-pitched mosquito-like tang-g-g along the trembling wire. Then the tiny voice once again.

"There! Didn't you hear that? And that, and that?"

We heard it now, sure enough—thud, thud, thud!—like doors swiftly banging along a distant corridor. Then, our imaginations catching fire, as it were, we heard all manner of strange things. The wire was not only alive, but jumping and mad with the melody of war. There was a shout, a yell, more terrific banging, and through it all that quiet, assured little voice.

Bang! Bang! Thud! "And, by the way, doc.," it said presently, "there's one particular thing I want to—"

A sudden shock, bursting on the ear like a bang of a big drum, whirled us off our chairs, dazed, giddy, and thoroughly alarmed.

Something had happened—but what! Again and again we tried the instrument. But no response came. Imagination completed the picture, though it could never complete the sentence. We saw, in our mind's eye, the shattered terrible wreck of Observation Trench 16. We replaced the mute telephone on the little table and walked quietly back into the shed.

The pretty sister with the Red Cross splashed across her breast was very softly ending the cradle song :

> Sleep, baby, sleep !
> Your father guards his sheep ;
> Your mother shakes the Dreamland Tree—
> Down falls a little dream for thee—
> Sleep, baby sleep !

" It's perhaps as well we shouldn't mention anything about the extra turn we've just heard—eh ? " whispered the doctor very quietly, as we moved back to our seats. He glanced at the watch on his wrist. " Twelve hours from now—and we shall know all about it. Time enough then."

But when that time came I was far away, at a battle-call from elsewhere. And the tale will never be told.

INTERNED.

THIS small village of Rake o' Flaze is so remote from centres of news, so hidden away from the great world of strenuous happenings, that it took us a rare time to realise the significance of this war.

When it began we were in the throes of a war of our own.

Somebody, in a state of well-meant but unauthorised enthusiasm, had painted the village pump blue. Consequently, there had been earthquakes and cataclysms in the senate at the Axe and Compasses, where the parish council met and flamed angrily over the matter, week by week.

Then our vicar took us to task, more in sorrow than in anger, and told us how Nero played the fiddle whilst Rome was burning—a much more interesting sermon than most of his, being fuller of facts and fighting than is usual with him. It was an allegory, he said, and he told us we ought to be ashamed of ourselves.

Then suddenly Jimmy Mobbs, our best bat, who drove a ball clean over Blazer's Oak last summer, enlisted; and we were convinced that the nation was up against something pretty big with a man of Jimmy's class chipping in, and him only just in what I might call the new moon period of matrimony.

We all became tremendously patriotic. If we couldn't all go out and fight the Kaiser and his crowd, we surely could serve our King and country in some other way, to the eternal glory of Rake o' Flaze, and in affectionate memory of our Jimmy.

We had sundry meetings of the council at the Axe and Compasses to discuss ways and means, but nothing particular came our way, though the parish council asked for trouble by forming itself unanimously into the Parochial and Patriotic

of the South Seas Missionary Sewing Circle, and a distinguishing badge on the left arm.

The P. P. G. was eating off its head, so to speak, one afternoon in the Axe bar-parlour, when the soothing, if somewhat sad, sounds of melody was wafted into our midst from afar. Lifting up our heads, we observed through the window one of the most familiar sights of the countryside—a band of musicians, five in number, tootling away on the village green.

There was a cornet-a-piston, a trombone, a bassoon, a clarionet, and a strange thing somewhat like a diseased mangold-wurzel with a hole in it, which we didn't know the name of, but which made fruity, but rather melancholy noises, even at polka time. The gentleman who blew into the hole was wide and fat, with a big sort of walrus moustache, which had been worn away by many years of draughtiness. Furthermore, he wore very big spectacles, through which watery-blue eyes blinked. The trombone maestro had lost most of his front teeth through constant exercise.

Though there was a difference in bulk of body and gloom of countenance in these five roaming bandsmen, a distinct family resemblance marked them. And it was the same, likewise, with every tune they played.

They were old acquaintances, these five melody manufacturers. They had toured Rake o' Flaze and the neighbouring villages for years and years; but somehow it had never struck us before that they were actually alien enemies of the most dastardly brand—in a word, a German band.

The chairman of the P. P. G. tumbled to the awful fact with that lightning flash of perception that has ever marked him in times of stress as a man among ten thousand.

"Gentlemen," he said, waving his yard of clay at the harmonious vision through the window—"fellow-members of the Parochial and Patriotic Guard (hear, hear!)—has it

ever struck you, gentlemen, that in the presence of them five individuals now playin' on the village green, innocent-lookin' though they are—has it ever struck you, gentlemen, that we have been harbourin' vipers in our boosoms ? "

And then, with astonishing eloquence, he explained how and why, pointing out in unanswerable argument that it was necessary for the honour of Rake o' Flaze, and the subsequent safety of the British Empire, for these interloping vipers to be held and interned, without delay, under the auspices of the P. P. G.

As soon as it was explained to us what the word " interned " rightly meant, we agreed, *nem. con.*, and, forming ourselves into martial array, we enfiladed the green, and, surprising the band in the very middle of an alien hymn tune, carried them off, much to their astonishment, to Mr. Tompkinson's tithe barn, where they were interned as tightly as local circumstances would permit.

Two or three hundred feet of barbed wire from the pheasantry crowned the operation with comforting completeness, and the news of our capture spread like wildfire all over the neighbouring country.

So did Mr. Tompkinson's pheasants, their wire having been removed ; but we couldn't help that. Sacrifice in war-time is bound to be made, and Mr. Tompkinson bore it with noble cheerfulness.

What to do with the interned was the problem which now faced us.

We began with a day-and-night guard, but the weather turning sour and dismal, we speedily wearied of that. There was a long discussion at a specially-convened meeting of the P. P. G. as to the advisability of turning our prisoners over to Lord Kitchener. But it was agreed, by a vote of nine to four, not to do that, as his lordship had his hands full enough already.

So we kept the law in our own hands, fed the prisoners daily, and watched them fill out—with somewhat mixed feelings. They were happy enough with nothing to do, plenty to eat, and nice warm straw to sleep on.

They never spoke an intelligible word in our hearing. The old gentleman with the walrus whiskers slept nearly all day, waxing visibly wider in girth as the great war progressed, and finally, after several weeks of this sort of thing, we decided to let the beggars out on parole, and fixed up a programme of manual labour for them—pigstye-cleaning, turnip-trenching, ditch-clearing, and so on, greatly to their sorrow.

We were forming them up in platoon to march out on this scheme one morning when some official gentleman from the Home Office—or some such important Government place—turned up, the fame of the Rake o' Flaze interned camp having seemingly reached as far as London.

He produced a large note book, and, calling walrus-whiskers up before him, asked him a quick, searching question in the German language.

The old gentleman blinked and shook his head. Other questions in other foreign languages followed. Same result. Finally the inspector tried civilised English. Very slowly he asked :

" Where were you born ? "

" Fourteen, Blinker's Rent, 'Oxton, guv'nor ! " replied the wicked old sinner, in the purest Cockney that ever was.

" And your name ? "

" 'Alf Wilkins, sir, beggin' your pardon ! "

" And these other—er—gentlemen ? "

" All blood relations, sir—Algernon Wilkins, Porky Wil—"

Whereupon the inspector suddenly went sort of purple in the face, fell up against the wall of the tithe barn, and went into convulsions. As soon as he had recovered he turned to us ; but what he said I'd rather not repeat.

Just wait until the next German band comes along, that's all !

MAGIC.

"Now, sit tight, and watch," said the range-officer, as he skilfully rolled a cigarette and crammed it into his long amber holder.

It was sheer conjuring—wizardry. The early morning had been misty and chill, with rime glistening on the muddy roads, and a faint scent of winter in the air. But the bright, valorous sun speedily changed all that, and out of the smoky grey of the far-away the distant landscape presently showed itself. Behind, to the left, rose a little hill, sparsely wooded, but affording cunning cover for our big guns, whose squat noses, raised heavenward, seemed to sniff the morning air like lurchers on the prowl.

Miles and miles away the horizon presented only a long, smudgy line of grey.

"Run your eye along that line," said the officer, "taking your bearings from that little tree there, and you will observe, if your sight is keen, a sort of dark dot. That dark dot is a house. I am going presently to remove that house. Have you spotted it yet?"

"Yes; but—"

"Oh!" laughed the range-finder, taking in a deep draught of the black caporel tobacco. "There's no such word as 'but' in this show; we've wiped it out of our dictionary. Just wait a bit; I'm expecting a signal to wave in the sky, and then—"

In a minute or two the signal came. There was a soft purring, far far away overhead. It was the morning song of an aeroplane, hardly bigger than a soaring lark, as she whirled and danced in the blue. She delivered her message in curves and spirals amid the clouds, and away she sped to vanish in the shimmer, intent, no doubt, on other business. But she had marked the dot on the horizon, and the officer had read it.

" Good ! " said he ; and opened a little book, wherein were many confusing entries of figures and fractions.

He also produced a chart, marked out carefully in squares, each square numbered.

" In these days," he remarked, " we aim by arithmetic, and not by eyesight. Learned chaps with bald, bulgy foreheads and specs, who have never seen a field-gun in their lives, probably, have worked this system out in the peaceful studies at home. Chaps with corns and carpet-slippers, no doubt ! But wily birds ! "

On a table made out of a soap box at his elbow there stood a small field-telephone, with an overhead wire running from his observation station to the little hill beyond where the big guns crouched, eager to be about their business. The other end of the wire communicated with the small, thatched hut of the gun-layers.

The officer rang up the hut.

" You there, Two-double-four-six Hop ? "

" Ay, ay, sir ! " (from the hut).

" All ready ? "

" Ready and waiting, sir ! "

" Is that you, Mr. Peters ? "

" That's me, sir ! "

" Well, you've got to smash up the household premises of Massa Johnson away there on the skyline. Allowing for

density of atmosphere, the range is ——, and the angle, Z-Y^2. That being so, you've got to fire into square 736 on Chart K. Got it ? "

" Got it, sir ! "

" And now," said the range-officer, passing over his field-glasses, " be good enough to watch that dot I have already pointed out to you. When you've got it focussed, tell me, and I'll give the word. It's just a little demonstration in the fine art of big gun sniping, and simply because it is a demonstration my gunner will probably make a muck of it. If he does, I'll skin him alive. Do you see the target ? "

" Yes ; but it's still a bit smudgy," I replied, rapidly manipulating my glasses to the correct focus. " Now I've got it ! "

" Then hang on to it ; and, whatever you do, open your mouth wide, and keep it open. Otherwise, the smash of that popgun going off will probably burst your ear-drum. So, open your mouth, and open your eyes, and see what we will send you. Now—"

The officer once more turned to the little telephone.

" Let her rip, lad," he said, quietly.

For three breathless seconds there was a complete silence. Then a roar as if the whole world had burst. The old soap-box swayed drunkenly at the earthquake, and then topped over on its side. A little wisp of smoke filmed up over the trees and melted in the morning shine.

And at the same instant the smudgy speck on the skyline was a speck no longer, but a whirl of smoke and dust and ashes—an Etna of flame and ruin, darkening the sky like an angry thunder-cloud.

" Quite neat," murmured the range-officer. " I thought Podgy Peters would manage it. I hope you'll excuse this little bit of showin' off. Couldn't resist it. But the deuce

of it is that he's gone and smashed up the soap-box exchange. Serve me right for swanking ! "

He rolled another cigarette, and turned away to walk down the incline in the direction of Two-double-four-six Hop. At a signal from him I went along also.

" And now," said he, as we crossed the withered grass, " it's *our* turn to look out for squalls."

THE STAR OF YOUTH.

THE STAR OF YOUTH.

I.

THE KNICKERBOCKERS OF THE NAVY.

A LITTLE time before the beginning of the war I received an invitation from the Admiralty to join the British Fleet on manœuvres. I remembered the bidding of Mr. Kipling's sailor hero, "Buy an 'am, and see life!" I joyfully bought the ham, and several other things which I imagined might be necessary to sustain life and keep my pecker up while roving the tempestuous mountains of the North Sea, and gratefully accepted the invitation.

Already, behind the scenes, there were whispers of Something brewing—an indefinite, intangible something. But Rumour always is muttering—a vicious, idle jade! Here, anyway, was Reality; something to see, something to do, alluringly spiced with high adventure. So, hey! for the ham and the wind across the sea, and a rattling time among Britannia and her boys who rule it!

* * * * *

A blowing summer's evening found me, lost and all alone, with my dunnage at my toes, on Weymouth Jetty. Ahead, where the green light swings, there was a clutter and a jam of boats and pinnaces, all piled high with stores, from "jacks" of bread to jars of marmalade, with bluejackets wedged in somehow—anyhow—and Bedlam let loose as far as the eye could see and the ear could reach. It seemed to be market

day with the Fleet. But the Fleet, when I asked for it, was invisible.

"Where is it?" said I to a handsome young tar who rolled up alongside of me—that is the only word for it—and saluted "Where is it?"

"Oh!—just round the corner, sir!" He waved a mutton fist at the purple horizon, where the white horses were racing furiously. "And you're the gentleman who's come down to join H.M.S. 'Courageous!' This way sir, please! The Hadmiral's pinnace is fourth to the right. Allow me to bear a hand with your baggage, sir!"

"How in the world did you know that I—" I stammered.

"Oh, *we* know you, sir! We can always tell you—an' the likes o' you!" He grinned, grabbed my baggage, and once more pointed to the crush of miniature shipping rasping at the jetty-head. "That's yours, sir—her with the green crocodile painted on her bows." Then he suddenly disappeared—apparently slap into the sea, with all my belongings. "Hi!" I shouted, and listened for the splash. But I heard nothing. Sailor or sprite, my mutton-fisted friend had vanished like the frightening end of an uncanny conjuring trick.

* * * * *

The Admiral's pinnace, too, seemed to know all about me. The captain, the crew, and the engineer of H.M.S. "Crocodile" welcomed me effusively. "Come aboard, sir!" cried the tough and salted skipper (saluting, too) in a high falsetto. I looked at him in astonishment. He was just a mere slip of a boy—little more than sixteen, I should judge, with the face and the lips of a Rubens Cherub, and the squeak, almost, of a bantling. But there was a steely resolution in his quick, roving eye, and a certain poise in his pretty, curl-clustered head that bespoke the man—the man, if not yet captain of

his soul, commander and cast-iron autocrat of one proud little ship upon the sea. To complete the couplet—it was, indeed, a pleasant sight, and an astonishing one. This child displayed all the confidence of Columbus, and more than his craft. He took me in hand, and smiled sweetly upon me—a tender, motherly smile. Then, something went wrong with a half-hitch, and though all his attention was apparently focussed upon me, he saw it all out of the corner of his cherubic eye, and rapped out a fierce order. . . . The language he used was so awful that the chief engineer turned pale. . . .

"All clear? Then carry on!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" The little twin-screws aft churned furiously. Then, to me—I was peering anxiously into the swirling water—"What's up, sir? Lost anything, sir? Har-rrd aport there, Mr. Jenkinson! The gentleman's dropped his hankercher!"

"I was looking," said I, apologetically, "for the sailor who was bringing my traps aboard. I fancy he tumbled in somewhere about here. Hadn't you better cruise around a bit, in case—"

"Is *that* all?" said the boy. "I thought perhaps you had lost your mouchoir; and in *that* case, of course—but we can't keep the Admiral's barge hangin' about the high seas for a mere sailor having a bath. Right ahead, there, Jenkinson, let her rip! And cheer up, sir; he'll turn up right enough—never fear!"

"When, do you think?" I asked, anxious for my dunnage.

"Oh! somewhere between here and the Nore. They nearly always do!"

* * * * *

Off we shot, making for that purple patch of white-fringed horizon at full speed. I crouched in the sternsheets, dodging the scorpion whips of a nasty-tempered sea, and

watching with awe and admiration the masterful handling of H.M.S. " Crocodile " by this self-reliant slip of a boy.

The green eye at the jetty head winked good-night to us as we made for the open water, leaving the " market " with its marmalade and its general mess far behind. Baby-boy was at the tiller, with his rough pea-jacket buttoned tight across his infantile throat, and shreds and lumps of wind-skimmed wave-tops coming *smack smack* athwart his face. Never a jot cared he! The night was rolling up, black-winged and threatening; H.M.S. " Crocodile " wallowed and shook—still no sign of the Fleet. I began to fear that the Navy, like my stalwart friend of the jetty, had been spirited away into this vast, this uncomfortable void. . . .

" I don't think we can have missed the road," said the Cherub, flashing a gay eye at me from under his peaked cap. " We shall be round the headland presently; and then look out for squalls! Whack her up, Mr. Jenkinson, or we shall be late for the Admiral's turtle soup and tomato trimmin's. Wonderful man, the Admiral, for tomatoes. . . . Ah!—here we are! "

We swung past the headland on the crest of a green-and-white streaked wave; and through the drenching smother of it as it broke across our bows we saw, as in a mirage across the crepuscular glimmer, the great ships of the first line riding at anchor with a twinkle of light showing here and there above the top-hamper; but for the rest—all grey and vast and wonderful.

" Like a blessed factory town, the way they smoke and spoil the landscape, eh? " said the boy. " They're keepin' a pretty neat line, eh? Two streets of 'em—Piccadilly and Tottenham Court Road. Our little lot's Piccadilly—No. 1. Tottenham Court Road crowd are merely—Dreadnoughts. Suburbs haven't arrived yet—expectin' 'em to-morrow. . . .

E-eeasy there, Mr. Jenkinson, or we shall be ramming the 'Collingwood.' There's Royalty aboard her, and *that* would never do!"

With the sure and certain touch of the old hand, our Liliput commander was taking the "Crocodile" at a rare pace through and across these grim, grey streets of fighting ships, with the main highway as full of small craft as the Strand on a summer's morning.

"Ah! Here we are; home at last!" And we ran under the counter of a huge battleship, spectral and stupendous.

"'Courageous,' ahoy! Anybody at home? No? Ring the front door bell, Mr. Jenkinson. Suppose they're all sleepin' of it off, the dogs! If nobody answers the tinkler, then heave something through the best bedroom window!"

Luckily for the plate glass, somebody was at home. We snuggled up and made fast in double-quick time. From high up, where the top of the gangway lost itself in the gloom, an anxious voice hailed my young gentleman at the tiller: "Mr. Crabtree, *have* you brought the Commander's capsicum vaseline? He's on the point of death with that jagged tooth of his; an' he's been cryin' out for you for the past hour—somethin' heartbreakin'!"

"Sorry!" replied Mr. Crabtree. "But I forgot all about it in the abnormal rush of passengers I've had to run this trip! I've got the co-respondent here, though" (indicating me), "and he seems a consolin' sort of person. My compliments and regrets to the Commander—hoping as how'll he accept as substitute for one tube of capsicum—one co-respondent, warranted hot stuff!"

"'Fraid that won't do!"—there was a warning ring in the voice. "You'd better unload the cargo of co-respondent and nip off back quick to the beach and take in capsicum!"

* * * * *

"Ta-ta!" said my young friend, cheerfully, as he heaved me on to the slippery gangway with a wonderful trick of muscle. "See you later! Me and the 'Croc's' got to wallow back across the stormy ocean all the way to Weymouth town, just because the Commander's got a twinge of tooth-ache. My tenth trip to-day! Fancy! One com-plete ship—one com-plete crew at full complement—and—Me! An' all sent miles and miles across this waste of waters for a shillin' tube of vaseline! That's the sort o' thing the British taxpayer has to shell out for!"

He chuckled merrily. "Right away, Mr. Jenkinson!"

The "Crocodile" shot off in the gathering darkness, and as I reached the gangway-head I just caught the flickering tag of Mr. Crabtree's final message to H.M.S. "Courageous":

". . . Sure there's nothin' else I can do for you? Corn-plasters for the captain, or a pair of hand-embroidered braces for the padre . . .?"

The rest was silence.

II.

THEIR JOYFUL OCCASIONS.

You are at home at once on a great battleship. It is a combination of a busy, bustling township and a happy family. The whole show is self-contained—astonishingly, alluringly so. Its miles of streets are well appointed; each one leads to something definite, something fascinating; it possesses a city for the centralisation of business affairs, industrial "districts" for manufacture of various and amazing kinds, a Belgravia and Mayfair (forrard in the neighbourhood of the quarter-deck), the suburbs (aft), and Hoxton and Whitechapel (down below).

Its population varies, according to circumstances and tonnage, from something like six or seven hundred to round about a thousand; you may discover, in the course of your morning walk, the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker; you will hear the cluck and clutter of cocks and hens, and so solve the mystery of the new laid eggs you had for breakfast this morning; and if fortune favours you in your perambulation, you may meet the only lady on board. Mary is her name. She is the ship's cow. . . . But it takes some time to discover these things.

My welcome at the gangway-head was effusive. That bright boy, Mr. Crabtree, of the "Crocodile," had vanished; here were his brethren, four of them—middies, bland and blithesome. As Mr. Crabtree was running the "Crocodile," so these boys seemed to be in supreme control of the huge "Courageous." There was no nonsense about them, and no overbearing ceremoniousness. Their etiquette was perfect, their manner gracious, and not condescending; but I observed their quick, young eyes sizing me up as I entered the fold. . . . "What sort of an animal is this that has been thrust amongst us?"

I managed to run the gauntlet, I hope, satisfactorily. There are certain observances the landsman should remember when he pays a visit to the Navy at sea. And unless he knows, he is apt to make rather a mess of things. A war correspondent does not join up to his job with revolvers, and map-cases, and periscopes slung round him, and spurs clinking at his heels; a "special" on a naval "turn" is a wise man if he leaves his white ducks and his yachting-cap at home with his silk hat and "frocker." Only Members of Parliament sport yachting caps when they visit the Fleet. They are spotted at once by the merry boys in blue, beguiled on to a destroyer (should the sea be a little bit jumpy)—and then

the tragedy develops. The sight of a plumpish gentleman with a yachting cap perched jauntily over one ear and a telescope tucked under his arm paying regurgitating tribute to Neptune is a spectacle for the gods up in high Olympus to chuckle over. . . .

So list, ye landsmen! When you come aboard, the young officers will salute you, gravely, and with the naval touch. Reply to the salute by raising your hat, remembering that you are saluting, not them, but the spirit of the ship, which is receiving you to her community. It is the survival of the old custom which prevailed in times long, long ago, when the Crucifix was displayed on the quarter-deck, to which all who came paid devout tribute.

* * * * *

I had to report immediately to the Captain. The Captain is the loneliest man on board the ship. He lives by himself in a hermit cell "down the first flight of stairs." A marine, armed to the teeth, stands sentinel over his door. He is rarely seen; he dines in solitary state—not exactly on hermit fare—he sleeps with one eye and a half open, and he is everlastingly at work. "Seeing the Captain" is a more perplexing, a more difficult business than "seeing the Editor," and unless the matter is urgent there is little hope.

A tall, thin, wiry man, with a tired, pale face, a tight mouth and stern eyes, was the skipper of the "Courageous." He looked me up and down.

"H'm!" says he presently, as he jabbed a pin into the chart which lay on the table before him. "H'm!—are you—are you what the newspapers call 'Our Naval Expert?' Are you one of them?"

"No, sir!" I replied, truthfully enough.

"Thank God for that!" says the Captain. "Then, the

ship's yours, from stem to stern. Do what you like, and go where you like, only don't worry *me*! I'll turn you over to the First Loo'tenant—a decent chap. Good afternoon!"

The First Luff was, indeed, a decent chap. Joyfully he "showed me the ropes"; he carried me down into the ward-room and introduced me to the "crowd"—the jolliest lot of school-boys imaginable; the Commander, a yard broad in the chest, with his tunic near splitting at every deep breath he took; the Engineer-Lieutenant, just joined on after a long spell in the China Seas, and still yellow in the face and slant-eyed (as sojourning for long in the East makes a man); the doctor, a Glasgow man, very dour and silent, and the cleverest amateur conjurer I ever met; the Lieutenant (T.)—torpedoes are the things he plays with—a dreamy-eyed giant, with longish hair carefully brushed back over a high, intellectual brow; the Major of Marines, who sports the famous "Cherry Medal" for fun, and who is so shy and so modest that he blushes like a schoolgirl when you talk to him; and last, and worthy surely of a whole book of romance to himself—the Padre. Of his reverence more anon, if you will bear with me, for he is a man apart—a character standing out vividly and picturesquely even among all these notable, but astonishingly modest, young men whose trick it is to put Britannia in the way of ruling the waves.

We had a ripping tea. "Is it China or Ceylon ye'll be fancyin', sorr?" says the Irish steward. China tea it is, with sardines and raspberry jam and seed cake, hot, steaming muffins, almost as big as half-quartern loaves, marmalade sandwiches and crisp Scotch shortbread! Tea on board a battleship is a ritual to be observed solemnly; so, over this Gargantuan meal we began our new and engaging friendships, cementing them stalwartly with the huge slabs of buttered muffin.

The demon of envy possessed my soul as I gazed upon the faces of these brown, fit, avid young men, so keen and yet so simple, so thorough at their job—their job just now was raspberry jam, and thoroughly they encompassed it! The ogre of envy, I say, gripped me as I turned to the tall Lieutenant (T.). I was on the verge of framing a sentence something like this:

"What a fine job your's is! Tell me——"

The Lieutenant (T.) turned to me, and before I could speak said:

"I say, what a fine job your's is! Tell me——"

I lay back in the swing chair and burst into a roar of laughter. The Lieutenant (T.) looked at me in wonder.

"What in the world's the matter?" he cried.

"Nothing in the world's the matter," I answered, apologising for my sudden cackle. "But the fact is, those are the very words I was on the point of putting to you!"

"Me!" said he, with an air of absolute astonishment. "Me? *My* job. Ye gods and little fishes! Believe me, mine's a dog's life! Believe me——"

I refused point blank to believe him, and at last I got him talking—talking about his job.

"Shop!" said the Lieutenant (T.), with a curl of his fine lip. "Shop!—candles—soap—sausages. Pah!"

"The most interesting talk in the world," I declared. "And you know you love it, so please carry on!"

So I wheedled this tough young shopkeeper to talk of his shop. In spite of himself and the curl of his handsome lip, he warmed to his business, and never was counter-chatter more enthralling than the flow from this torpedo tradesman. To me, a mere lubber, much of it was Choctaw for comprehension, but out of the whirl of calculations and mathematics, curves and angles and figurations, I managed to get a mental

picture of this capable young craftsman dealing out invisible death and destruction . . .

When the decks are cleared for action his post is far down in the bowels of the ship, squatting under the circle of light shed by a small electric lamp over the torpedo tube. Beyond, and all around, utter darkness prevails—black darkness and absolute silence. With the receiver of a naval telephone glued to his ear, he is crouching there awaiting the order to press the little button which releases the super-human shuttle of swift death beside him. He does not aim his torpedo at the enemy; it is the ship that is aimed, not the torpedo, and all this manœuvring is accomplished far, far away, up in the fire-control tower.

"So," said I, "if anything—er—happens to the ship you've got a pretty lively chance——"

"One in about ten thousand million!" replied the Lieutenant (T.), with a broad grin. . . . "Hope I've not been boring you! . . . Have a Woodbine?"

* * * * *

Enter the Padre, with an old clay pipe tucked into his chin, bright brown eyes beaming under fierce brows, grey torpedo beard awag with friendliness and the possibility of a yarn with somebody fresh——

"Time these children were abed!" says he. "Night-night, Torp!" And then, to me, "Come along to my cubby-hole, and we'll talk—

> '. . . of ships and sealing wax,
> And whether pigs have wings!'"

And so, far into the night and until the dawn shows grey and cold through the port light, we sit and talk—talk of ships and ships—and more ships.

The matter of the sealing wax, and the pigs, is postponed *sine die.*

III.

THE PADRE.

"I'M father and mother to 'em all, from the Admiral down to the cook's boy!" said the padre, as he lay full-length on his bunk, arms behind his grizzled head, and clay pipe in full blast. "Taking it by and large, ours is a happy little home, and my parish is—im-mense!" He deftly balanced a purple carpet slipper on the toe of a white cotton sock.

"A Navy chaplain's job is not all treacle and hymns by a long chalk. Tact and common-sense carry much further; and if a padre wants to do his whack and pull his weight in the community over which a careful Board of Admiralty has appointed him spiritual adviser, he has to combine the qualities of schoolmaster, doctor and nurse, rather than play his hand as preacher. The sailor-man at sea, taking him altogether, is a blissful, ignorant, confiding infant. My daily confessional among the tough young sinners of the lower deck is a rich mine for the philosophic explorer to delve into. Man to man, we come to grips with all sorts of mental and moral puzzlers. The more the merrier, say I; and I let 'em all come. They appeal to the padre for medicine for all maladies, from toothache to Tractarianism.

"Two or three mornings every week, when all's easy on board, I give them popular lectures on all sorts of subjects—easy, elementary, and, I hope, interesting. History, geography, exploration, literature, war, and so on. They simply eat it! An elementary chat on 'The Craft of Seamanship,' with the Ark as basis, went down like jam. Then I had a go at Strategy, illustrated from battles in the Old Testament, and this took such a hold on them that the next night, going down below, quietly, I found the master gunner reading out in a resounding bass, to a silent, eager little crowd, the moving

story of the Siege of Samaria. I arrived just at the end of the chapter. The master gunner closed the Book with a bang. 'Boys,' he said, 'I call that a damned fine yarn!' 'Hear, hear!' came the hearty chorus from the congregation. 'And now, Tubby, just oblige us with the Jericho scrap, if it ain't troublin' you too much!'

"'Anything to oblige,' replied the master gunner. 'Let me see, now, whereabouts *is* Jericho?' He damped a huge thumb, and began turning over the leaves. I considered that this was no place for me at this particular moment. I stole away as quietly as I had come, and left them to it.

* * * * *

"And the gentlemen of the gun-room—the middies—they're my special preserve. From Mr. Crabtree, the senior sub.——"

"I've already had the pleasure of meeting that original," said I, with a smile.

"Well, he's typical of the whole bunch. They're choice blooms, every one of them; gentlemen to the core, keen as mustard at their job, full of beans, and splendidly, magnificently jealous of the honour of the ship. Born Admirals to a man are these babes of mine!" The padre's bright eye softened as he spoke of them. "Chips of the old block, many of them; to realise it, you've only got to look at the names painted on their sea chests. The Nelson touch smites you fair and square in the eye as you read those slabs and splashes of white paint. And the Nelson spirit lives and moves, fresh and fragrant as ever in the gun-room of H.M.S. 'Courageous.'"

Through the open doorway came the sound of distant revelry, followed by a crescendo of youthful laughter, and then—crash upon crash, howls of dismay, followed by a wild yell—"Out!—*Dogs of War!*"

"What is that?" I asked, in some alarm.

"That," replied the padre, with his quick, merry smile, "is the Nelson spirit punctuating my remarks. *That* is the gun-room, up to some hilarious jiggery. When you feel the ship shake and the windows rattle, and half the plaster from the ceiling falling on your head—don't be alarmed. You'll find it isn't torpedoes or mines, or big gun practice, but simply the gun-room engaged in the entertaining practice of keeping itself fit! Youth must be served, you know. Here on this ship, and clean through the British Navy, you will find, wherever you go, youth triumphant, youth at the helm—youth running the whole show. With us, now, the Star of Youth is shining magnificently, with a ray serene and pure. You get the light of it here undimmed—sometimes dazzling. I often wonder——"

He paused, and took a long pull at his bubbling old pipe.

"I often wonder," he went on, "what is coming to try the mettle of this sterling, this triumphant young brotherhood. Something is coming, I know. I do not aspire to the magic of prophecy; but I can feel that Something in my bones, and that Something is—War! The wires are humming with it. This vast population of ours is throbbing with it, and before we know where we are, unless I have misread the great riddle, our big guns will be booming over the plateau of the North Sea!

"I am a man of peace"—the padre smiled, somewhat grimly through the wreathing tobacco smoke—"I love the quiet life. I am a ruminant, and I would ever be content with a book of verses underneath the bough; but I have turned myself, *nolens volens*, into a man of war. I have swotted up the science of navigation, strategy, tactics, gunnery; at a pinch, I verily believe I could run this hulk for an hour or so, given a clear road. Strange, you will say, for a priest, who ought to be telling his beads in his spare time, or learning

the double-handed accompaniment of 'Onward, Christian Soldiers,' on the ship's harmonium. But the glamour of the Navy has gat hold upon me; 'the way of a ship in the midst of the sea' has enthralled me to solve the mystery of it. Behold me, after morning service, down in the *sanctum sanctorum* of the gun-room, with the middies all hiving round me while I try my humble best to knock Eton out of their dear, fat heads, and navigation into them! My infants' class, I call it; but my kindergarten preliminaries have so far worked so well that the best of my children could now run a destroyer—to say the least of it—up the Kiel Canal on dead reckoning . . . Bless their dear little hearts—they're wonders!

"And now," he went on, beating the air with the stem of his stubby pipe, "have you ever realised that throughout the whole of this huge citizenship of the sea not a single man knows what the smash of battle means, or can visualise, for a moment, the clotted horror of a twelve-inch shell bursting amidships, scattering death and mutilation—which is worse than death—broadcast? Never a man has seen blood splashing in anger, except for an occasional punch on the nose in a personal 'squab'!"

"For the matter of that," said I, "no more have the Germans—so the odds are even!"

"H—m! Do you really think so?" murmured the padre, puffing vigorously. "Just you wait and see!"

"It is on the knees of the gods!" I said.

"No!" declared his reverence—"it is in the hands of the master-gunner of the British Navy!"

* * * * *

Then, the night being yet young, the chaplain slipped back into the rich pastures of Reminiscence. He has roved the world, from the China Seas to the Groves of Camberwell. He has fought and fraternised with brigands in the East;

he has run contraband cargoes in strange, pirate craft, across the Yellow Sea ; he has heard Pan piping merrily amid the olive groves of the Grecian Archipelago ; in far Thibet he has climbed the " Roof of the World," sharing the magic and the meditations of the slit-eyed, silent priests. Some of these tales I will tell you one day, when the sky is fairer, and the happy times are with us once again for the telling of tales. But now it is war—war, and always war ! The drum is beating, and we must follow the drum !

" And that reminds me," says the padre, *apropos* of nothing in particular, " of my first experience of real horror—the massacre of C——, one of the little islands in the Archipelago —when the Turks and the Greeks were cutting one another's throats in one of those sudden frenzies which burst out in that part of the world occasionally. I'll spare you the details ; they are too horrible. The night of the massacre I was dining with thirteen of the victims. They included some charming English people. We had scarcely reached our ship, which was lying in the harbour, when the murdersome affair happened. . . . Next morning we ran a burying party ashore, with a band and a drum ; why the drum, goodness only knows ! But it was there ; and in the middle of the burial service, which I conducted, the Turks opened fire on us, though they knew perfectly well what our business was. They had only one gun—a rusty old thing dating from about the Flood—and they had run short of ammunition. A ship had come in with a cargo of piano-wire ; they looted the vessel, cut the piano-wire into suitable lengths, jammed it in the gun, and let fly at us ! And in the very middle of the Committal Service that wire was screaming and whooping around us. At the second shot it made a sieve of the big drum. . . ."

The fierce, warning note of a bugle rang out, cutting short the chaplain's tale. Every light went out suddenly.

"What's happened?" I called in the groping darkness.

"It's all serene, my son," came the assuring voice of his reverence, followed by a thump on the floor. "That's the call to general quarters. We're going into action! Come along! All hands on deck! Follow the man from Cook's!"

A match spluttered, and in the ghostly light of it I made out the spectral form of the padre, and followed it into the outer darkness.

"And now!" said my confiding man of war, "look out for squalls. You're going to see some fun!"

IV.

THE REAL THING.

THE night was cloudless. There was no moon, but overhead every star was out, forming a picture of radiance sublime in an indigo sky. There seemed a tremor of suppressed excitement in the dazzle of this Olympian audience, watching from high Heaven the moving majesty of the Grand Fleet, as it swept onward, controlled as if by some magical instinct. It must have been a spectacle of supreme grandeur; we, being in the second ship in the line, could see little of its splendour.

Every light was out. At a precisely-measured distance of two and-a-half cables' length we were following the flagship of the Commander-in-Chief, with never so much as a twinkle of light to guide us, and taking our time, our distance, and our speed entirely from the foamy wash at the stern of our guide. The ship behind us took her measure from *our* wash—and so on throughout the whole line of our "line-ahead progression." With a lumpy sea on, and a black night for steaming through, this is a ticklish business! The fate of

three or four millions of money, the safety of a thousand souls, trembles in the balance at every lift of a wave, as the Fleet pounds onward and ever on. The flicker of an eyelid might upset everything. But the eyelids of the Navy do not flicker when the Great Game is being played.

The Navigating Commander, up in the conning-tower, is running this particular show, and running it in the dark—completely confident in his own powers. He is absurdly young to look at, broad, stubby, fair-haired, and abundantly freckled. He is so short that you can only just see the square prow of his chin about the tarpaulin apron guarding the rail of the conning-tower. They call him " Florence " down below. Up here, stern, fierce, and unbending, he is known as " Sir ! "—" Yes, Sir ! " " No, Sir ! " " Aye, aye, Sir ! "

Upon him devolves the task of " keeping station," though the Heavens fall. Line ahead, full steam, and with every ounce being " whacked out of her " down in the engine-room, it is his duty to keep that line. One of the first axioms pounded into you in the Navy is that " a broken line is fatal ! " The Navigating Commander knows this ; it is the A.B.C. of his alphabet, and he must be ready to fall out of the line the very moment he is disabled, so as not to endanger the next ship astern. That two-and-a-half cables' length allows him but a mere handful of seconds in which to make up his mind what to do. In that brief spell he has to think, to weigh probables and possibles, and to act !

We trust ourselves to Florence, with an abiding faith in his seamanship—and his freckles. He will carry us through. On this wonderful clear night of stars the padre and I, after having wormed our way through miles and miles of pitch dark corridors and falling repeatedly over the fire hose, which has been run out in every passage-way and alley in the ship, reach the deck at last.

No sound—not even a whisper. Every man is at his post, standing by the guns, ready to " man and arm " boats, ready to " out net defences," and ready to " clear decks for action " —which last order means that everything wooden, movable and inflammable must be heaved overboard, from the cherished mechanical piano down in the gun-room, to the chicken-crates aft. For in action, the fear of fire is the greatest of all fears: any " litter " above or below is fatal. That is why the fire hose is run out throughout the length and breadth of the ship, and that is why, when action is imminent, all the corridors are flooded ankle-deep.

* * * * *

On, on we rush through the black water. The excitement of it makes my blood tingle. The impressiveness of the enfolding silence is almost awful. Swift and noiseless as phantoms we stream out to sea. There is no reality in our passage. It is all dreamlike and wonderful. Under this mystic glimmer of starshine our monsters of steel plunge on —grey, grim ghosts of themselves, to dissolve, presently, in the gleam of the day-star.

" We are keeping a perfect line," says the padre, as together we lean far over the rail and strain our eyes astern. " Miles and miles of it! Might have been ruled with a yard-measure! "

Where are we? Nobody knows—but Florence, perhaps. Long ago, the last of the Channel lights had been drenched under the rising line of the horizon. Astern, all view of land or sea or sky is obscured by the vast, piling mountains of black smoke pouring from the funnels of the greatest Fleet that ever put to sea. Ahead, all is emptiness; whatever craft may have been about, having wind of our coming, have run shoreward, or far out to sea, to make way for our

thundering procession. Our engines are running true—true as the ship; in the silence of this magic night, we can hear, quite clearly, the soft *purr-purr* of the turbines. On the bridge an officer sneezes suddenly: and that, too, rings out almost alarmingly under the whispering stars. Our destination is unknown; but there is such resolution in our progress, such grimness in the crouch of our mighty ship, that we feel assured this concerted night-dance of ours holds more in it than merely play. Surely, surely, we are running into the jaws of some great adventure; surely, the squall of battle is ahead!

I crawl to the turret of the twelve-inch gun. The monster is stripped for business; around the pit-head mouth of the ammunition-hoist I find the gun crew squatting—keen, alert, ready, and every man breathing hard, in deep-chested excitement. Amidships, the quick-firers have their complement of attendant craftsmen, and far down below, crouching over his uncanny, silent shuttle of devilry, is, of course, my friend the Lieutenant (T.), grimly cheerful under the stress of his "fifteen-million-to-one chance." The rough-and-tumble revelry of the gun-room is silent now. Each of those bright young gentlemen, who ought, from the look of them, to be tucked up in their little beds, is now stern and eager at his task, swaddled in rough oilskins and booted high to the thighs.

* * * * *

Presently, the stars pale; the glistening, diamond-dusted pathway of the Galaxy,

> . . . that Milky Way
> Which nightly as a circling zone thou see'st
> Powder'd with stars

fades to the dimness of a wisp of cloud. Dawn is at hand. It comes up, not like thunder, but with the softness of a

dissolving view; and when at last the sun appears, we find ourselves, alone in our mightiness and pomp and circumstance, upon the wide sea. Here is elbow room to dance in; and dance we do, in all manner of strange evolutions which would be absurd in this staid old family party of fat battleships, were it not so wonderful. We set to partners; we do the Daisy-chain, dance Sir Roger de Coverley to a true heel-and-toe measure—we run through the whole gamut of ocean Terpsichore; and when at last the great guns roar out at a mimic enemy invisible over the loom of the horizon, I am carried, by a smutty-faced monster, all grime and grease and grit, into the turret of the twelve-inch, to observe, for my very self, "how we do It!"

My ears are already plugged with cotton-wool; my heart is pattering.

Smutty-face bellows into my ear: "When she goes pop (that's the twelve-inch 'letting loose') open your mouth as wide as you can and take a deep breath! If you don't——!"

I crawl up a perpendicular ladder of thin steel, squeeze through a manhole very little bigger than an ordinary London pavement coal-shoot, am grabbed by a grisly Chief Gunner, and planked and held in front of a circular disc of steel, divided off into numbers and fractions, and certain weird hieroglyphics, which the Chief very kindly attempts to explain to me. The gun-layer by my side is squinting through a telescope and turning a little brass wheel, watching meanwhile the indicating dial, which tells him, by some magic I would not, if I could, explain, of elevation, of wind allowance, and of range.

"Load 12-inch guns!" comes the order, short and sharp. A gnome touches a lever. Instantly Tophet is let loose. With a terrific clang up out of the lower darkness leaps the cradle containing the huge shell and the cordite charge behind it. Another and another. The breach opens

magically ; closes, and opens again ; and as each roaring shot is fired another gnome at my left, armed incongruously with a butterfly-net, catches the empty shell-case as it is automatically ejected. In a pause in this demoniac clang and clatter I hear the calm voice of the Gunnery Lieutenant complaining through the Navy 'phone to somebody (presumably) up in the fire-control tower : " Why in Hell don't you speak up ? I can't hear you in all this clatter ! Can't you understand that I'm firing 12-inch shells in this act, and not peas through a perishin' pea-shooter ? And *you* ain't exactly supposed to be conveying love messages in tender whispers—Maria ! "

Another order is snapped out : " Load and fire 4-inch guns ! " So we leap out of the 12-inch turrets and proceed to deal with the smaller engines of destruction. The battle tears on like a whirlwind. Down below, tumult is afoot along the twilight corridors and in the cockpit, where the P.M.O. and the stretcher bearers are at work, with the padre administering spiritual consolation.

Then the bugle sounds a fresh note, the " Retire," which means that we have won, and can now open water-tight doors. A third call almost immediately follows—the " Secure "—and that means all's well. The gloom of below decks is flooded once again with light ; portholes are re-opened, electric fans set going, and down below we once more breathe the keen salt air of the sea.

An exhausted Gunnery Lieutenant falls into a saddleback chair and calls feebly for an egg-cocktail with plenty of nutmeg in it.

" Now," says he, " if this actually ***was*** the Real Thing, I wonder——"

But the merciful arrival of the egg-cocktail cuts short his soliloquy. It ends in a gurgle.

RAKE O' FLAZE.

RAKE O' FLAZE.

I.

AUNT ANN.

LIFE was not so breathless in those quiet days of long ago, when my great-aunt ruled the placid family. I had near forgotten her, when the scent of a sprig of lavender from Mitcham Fair brought her back so really that for a delicious spell the quiet past blotted out everything—and I was a child once again. The dreams and realities of childhood (they are ever the same) returned; the sprig of lavender became a fairy's wand; and the curtain rolled back across the years. I remember the days were all sunshine then—sunshine and flowers lifting their heads in sweet worship to the blue sky so tremendously far away that Heaven and the getting there set a problem bewildering and impossible to me. Aunt Ann settled it all, and the picture she drew for me still remains in all its crude glory of wings and harps, jasper and gold, milk and honey, and—Everlasting.

* * * * *

I suppose most children have tried to puzzle out the meaning of Everlasting, as I did, until the eternity of it throbbed in my brain. I used to sit by my aunt in chapel on those always sunny mornings. It was a magic place, with bright blue

walls and a ventilator in the far corner through which I always imagined the Rev. Mr. Timmis's extempore prayers ascended and the answers to them descended. Occasionally a sunray would shine through the bars, and the dust atoms dance in it; and then I knew that real holiness was present and stirring. and the blessings were coming thick and fast. Through the windows I could see the tombstones leaning over the peaceful dead, as if watching for signs of the Resurrection that I knew might come at any moment; and I made haste to be very, very good, and repent, and repent—until the drone of the good gentleman up in the pulpit and the hum of the summer bees through the open window lulled me invariably to sleep, leaning against the crinkly bombazine of Aunt Ann's Sunday frock. . . . .

* * * * *

In the next pew sat old Rhoda, who kept the little sweet-shop in the village; and Mr. Church, the tailor. Rhoda was as deaf as a post; but she used to say she could always hear the angels singing on windless Sundays, and that was why she came to chapel, dear soul. She brought with her a little paper of acid-drops, and always gave me one for "finding the place" for her. At hymn-time Mr. Church would turn sideways and sing in a nasal treble with a tremolo to it. Thus he had a full view of the congregation over the top of his horn spectacles; and as he made most of the men's Sunday coats he was able to mingle pleasure and business with the undoubted fervour of his religion. You could never mistake tailor Church's handiwork of black, shining broad-cloth. When my grandfather complained that the cut of his new "Sunday-go-to-meeting" made the collar stick out at the neck like the cowl of an infidel monk, the old tailor replied, "It bean't the collar of the coat so much as the deformity of the man." Whereat my grandfather—as tall and well-made

a deacon as ever stood at church door with pewter collection plate—retorted: "Then, Mr. Church, every deacon in this church is deformed!"

* * * * *

My grandfather was ever keen at the uptake, whether in matters spiritual or matters sartorial; and had it not been for Aunt Ann, with her soft tongue and her winning smile, there would have been dissension in the church. Ah! she was a wonderful woman. She was small—almost fragile. Her face was oval and ethereally pale, and her hair of faded gold was parted severely in the centre, to fall over her ears in curling ringlets under the prim set of her cap. Her dress was of Puritan soberness, tight over the shoulders and breast, and full and flounced in the skirt. She had a habit of sitting in a straight-backed early Victorian chair, with her slim, white hands folded in her lap, and the only ornaments she permitted herself to display were two long pendant ear-rings. Thus, she formed an integral part of the furniture of her drawing-room, matching the lustres on the mantelpiece with almost comic perfectness. Her voice was rich with low melody; her eye full and dark and burning unquenched in spite of her long maidenhood, for she never married. The maternal element was lacking. "I was ever too tidily disposed for matrimony," she said once, and sighed at the saying of it. Naturally, she had no sense of humour: all those things she bundled together in the category of Vulgarity. In her house one moved with soft step. It was always Sunday in her drawing-room; and from the shelves in the little library "Barnes on the Thessalonians" set the keynote of Aunt Ann's literature, in pious binding of drab, in company with Dr. Dobbs's Sermons and "The Christian Year."

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Once a month there was always a Sunday dinner party, temperately hearty ; and at the end of it my aunt would ring for Jane and say, " Will you kindly prepare the jam for the Communion ? " And half-an-hour later Jane would come in with a tall jug of jam-water, for no fermented wine was ever allowed at the evening communion service at the chapel.

When Aunt Ann died, rich, full of years, and with much honour among her own folk, there were three ministers in the pulpit at the funeral service. To one of them (him with a cork arm and much eloquence) she left her all. Promptly he retired from the ministry, thus proving that virtue is her own reward. Some day he must pass Beyond, like all of us. And when (if ever) he meets that quiet, masterful lady with the long ringlets, she will no doubt—as ever—be equal to the occasion.

II.

RURAL HARMONY.

THE unequal and alarming success of the Rake o' Flaze Drum-and-fifers, led to the proceedings which established that far-famed institution known as the Rake o' Flaze Brass Band. The Drum-and-fifers used to practise on the Major's lawn. A high wall between the lawn and the road kept the performers fairly free from missiles. Young Critty's brother hit the drum once, it is true, with a fat ripe tomato ; and on another occasion a slab of Mr. Wanks's margarine (purloined) destroyed the musical sequence of the first sheet of " O, where is my Wandering Boy To-night ? " (copied by the bandmaster). But what really broke up the D. and F.'s was on

one fateful summer's eve, when each performer was putting his soul into the top-note of "Killarney"—each blowing for his life in order to get the top octave D clear and shrill. It so happened that the pork butcher's young mare was being driven by the wall at the time. Thinking the noise was trains—of which she was in deadly fear—the mare bolted, and there was a nasty accident. The bill for repairs was £2 18s. 1d., and an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Parish Council, sitting three days later, comprehensively voted Mrs. Mew's pigstye and the D. and F.'s as "Nuisances"—and they had to be removed.

It was "London" Wimple, the village blacksmith, who first thought of the idea of a Brass Band. He was called "London" because as a youth he served as a potman at Peckham Rye, near the L.C.D. station. He was a conscientious performer on the cornet-a-piston, and every Saturday night he cut the village hair in the little room behind the shop. The indispensable Mr. Wanks supplied him with pomatum at wholesale prices, just to encourage village industries. Since the unfortunate accident to the pork butcher's mare, Rake o' Flaze had yearned for harmony; and the intelligent and patriotic rendering of "Die Wacht am Rhein" by a travelling German Band, which had just enlivened the village, appealed to "London's" musical soul. There was no lack of Talent. It was an open secret that every Sunday afternoon the postman locked himself in his bedroom and diligently practised the bass of "There is a Happy Land" on the euphonium. In his hands that familiar air bore a striking resemblance to the intermittent gruntings of a hippopotamus on the banks of the Irriwady.

"You never can take your Bible oath," said Poacher Jem to me one day, "whether 'tis postman a-practisin' or old Mother Mew's pigs a-bein' fed. Whether postman larnt it

from the pigs, or whether pigs larnt it from the postman, 'ud take a larneder man nor *me* to say."

* * * * *

Mr. Wanks, in the enthusiasm of the moment, tried his hand at the trombone. "There's summat I like about the slithery way it pulls in an' out," said he. "An' blowin', I've heard, is good for the heart." He put his lips to the instrument, worked the handle up and down as a preliminary, and blew. The good man was startled and pained to find that he produced a noise like the tearing of many yards of unbleached calico. "There must be a worsp or somethink in the works," he said.

"London" persevered with his scheme, and as a result of a famous Saturday night's meeting in the hair-cutting room, recruits rolled in. The Plymouth Brethren refused to join. They didn't mind harmoniums, but they drew the line at Brass. The Vicar wrote to "London" offering a clarionet, and himself to play it. He also suggested that the sexton should be taught the Big Drum, explaining that his faithful old retainer

> "while still possessing a considerable modicum of muscularity in his arms, is somewhat bronchitic, and possesses no more breath than the quantum necessary to enable him to carry out his diurnal duties."

The district was kind, and sent in contributions. Squire Braughan, who is going to be the Conservative candidate at the next election, thought this a good opportunity for making himself popular, and forwarded an oboe—an article of musical warfare which perplexed "London" terribly. He borrowed Mr. Wanks's dictionary, and found that "oboe" meant "a kind of strawberry." He said he didn't know how to play

tunes on fruit, so he gave it to Mad Harry, the Vicar's gardener. A lady on the outskirts with more benevolence than expert knowledge sent her late husband's zither, and there were several penny whistles and a megaphone on the list. But after a judicious weeding-out, and a few purchases through an advertising periodical (which distinguished itself by forwarding a bassinette in mistake for a bassoon), the instruments arrived at last, and the instrumentalists, having been shaven and shorn by "London," sat round for a Saturday night's instruction from that worthy son of Rake o' Flaze.

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Of course there were hitches. Mr. Wanks wrestled so hard with his trombone that he nearly wore the slide out. When there was a slack moment at the shop, he would slip behind the curtain of the fancy department, and make frantic shots at the chromatic scale. One day Mrs. Mew, who always wore carpet slippers in fine weather, walked in quietly, to purchase some golden syrup. Not observing Mr. Wanks anywhere, she tapped on the counter with a penny. At that moment the invisible Mr. Wanks extended his cheeks, and the gallant trombone answered in a piercing brazen wail that would have struck terror into a soul stronger than that possessed by any of the Mew family since the race began. Three hours afterwards Mrs. Mew was found hiding under her bed.

The sexton was not altogether a success. He just dug his music out; and in the middle of a selection he always stopped short for a bar or two. In those silences the cottagers, listening far away and out of sight of the performers, would nod their heads and say with conviction, "'Ull-*o!* there's ole Willium a-spittin' on 'is 'ands agin! There'll be billy-oh on that there drum directly!" And there always was.

The first public performance by the Rake o' Flaze Brass Band was on the occasion of young Critty's wedding. It was early in the Band's history, and they only knew "God Save the King" with safety. But they played it to quick-march time when the happy couple left the church, and the guests who came from a distance were all convinced that they had heard that tune somewhere before!

III.

BLESSED MEMORY.

I ALWAYS imagined Rhoda a very near relation of the Little Old Woman of my pet fairy tale—she was so little, and so old. She lived in a tiny cottage with a doll's-house window to it, and her face was so sweet and so fragile that the most riotous of the children who played around her home were quieted when she opened the door and shook her curls at them in half-humorous remonstrance.

She lived by herself—mysteriously alone. Never lover nor husband had come her way; but in her solitude she was content and well pleased with the small things the good God sent her. On sunny days, when there was balm in the air, and the little white clouds drifted high, Rhoda would come out and sit on the top step with her lace pillow on her knees, and weave wonderful patterns in fairy cobweb-tracery, while the bobbins danced and clicked. That was her living, mainly—lace that a King's daughter would be proud to wear. She also made balls of soft leather, cunningly sewn, and sold sweets in tiny packets; "hundreds and thousands," we used to call them.

* * * * *

My earliest memory is of her—Rhoda and sunshine, and the swallows whirling and wheeling over her cottage, and now and again darting downward for a peep under the ancient sun-bonnet of faded lilac—then back again with a "*sweet-sweet-sweet*"—round the church spire—lost in the dark green shadow of the sombre yews—sudden black flashes past the white gravestones—and finally down the wide street again, the ever-joyous summer lightning of the village. I suppose winter came in those merry days of childhood, with the swallows far away, and Rhoda crooning over her small fire; but I have no recollection of it. Our very young days come back to us in flashes; the sun is always riding gloriously in heaven, and the trees are green, and the music of birds long since silent chimes through the long corridor where the gay pictures of the past hang in their frames of gold. Winter dwells only in the present, grim and icy.

On week-days Rhoda's slight figure was tricked out in a dress of flowered print, always neat and always clean. Every morning she went for a little walk up Lovers' Lane, where the bluebells lived. She would trip across the grass delicately, lifting her skirt with the unconscious grace of a high-born lady, and chattering to herself. The bluebells nodded gravely to the twinkle of her white stockings, and the blackbirds and the thrushes were unafraid when she came their way. The larks soared and sang, and when their silver music came down to her in glittering cascades Rhoda would look up and smile. Snug in the long grass, the rabbits, hearing a soft footstep near by, would sit up suddenly, cocking their ears and stiffening their whiskers as the trespasser approached. "'Tis only little old Rhoda," they would say, and nestle down again to their rest, quite content.

One of her chief pleasures was to meet the children coming out of school, and hear them their small lessons, and help

them through the tangled maze of the nine-times table. She would tell them of the mysteries and the wonders of Nature; the sacredness of birds' eggs, and how, whenever a cruel child destroyed a nest of singing birds, the angels up in heaven knew all about it, and cried. The children loved her, as she loved them. They would do anything for her. She taught them to sing "Once in Royal David's City," "In the fields with their flocks abiding," and "We are but little children weak"; and so it was that the children's choir in our small village won fame for many a mile because of the sweetness of it.

On Sundays she wore sober black of a period long forgotten, and a bonnet of spangled jet, with spiky things on it which trembled at the emotion of her prayers—for she was an earnest Christian, more intimate, we used to think, with holy things and the congregation of the white-robed saints than the minister himself, whose visage was worldly, and who loved his marigolds (so they said) more than his God.

* * * * *

There came a time this winter when Rhoda was no longer seen about. On the third day they entered her little cottage, and found her lying on the bed, a frail shadow of her small self. Neither fire nor food was in the room; in the iciness of it she lay there in a flimsy white dress frilled and flounced in a dead fashion. It was the dress made for her wedding. . . . Somewhere behind the piled years there was a story we should never know.

Two kind gentlemen came from the House—where they are sometimes kind—to take her away, with an official order signed by the chairman of the Board. Happily, she did not understand. She took one of them for the minister, whose death in 1869 is recorded upon a marble tablet on the chapel wall.

"It is kind of you to call, Mr. Manning," she whispered. "I would have none but you to marry us. . . . see—I have been trying on my frock. Is it too gay for so solemn a business . . . ?"

The first kind gentleman looked strangely at the second kind gentleman, who nodded—and together they tip-toed out of the room. A cosy seat had been set for Rhoda inside the van of Joe, the one-armed carrier. Joe drove past the House on his way to the county town that day and never stopped. There was no passenger for the House, and Joe, who was one of Rhoda's "children," and who still remembered the hymn of the Royal City, stroked his beard and was glad.

* * * * *

That night Rhoda fell asleep quietly, and somewhere near midnight a bright star trembled in high heaven and fell—like a tear.

Mr. Perkins—one of her children—made the most beautiful coffin he had ever made—"for love." Joe saw to the coffin-plate, and brought it from the county town in his van, driving so slowly, out of reverence for the dead, that he was an hour late with the village parcels and the newspapers, in spite of the fact that it was election time and he himself a hot politician. The engraving on the brass said simply:

RHODA

Aged 96.

Blesséd Memory.

We had a churchyard burial, the chapel ground being long over full. The sun shone through the stained glass of the south window, and it was all very sad, but very beautiful. At the end, to the wonderment of the clergyman, the clerk,

the choir, and the crowded congregation, six tall men, with great beards, stepped out from the shadow of the belfry door, and at a signal from the steel hook proceeding from the armless sleeve of Joe, broke into tuneful melody:

"Once in Royal David's City
Stood a lowly cattle shed . . ."

They were Rhoda's children—grey and grizzled, but children for all that upon this memorable morning. And Rhoda heard the children's hymn once again as she had taught it in Lovers' Lane—and smiled in Heaven.

IV.

THE DEAR DEPARTED.

AFTER being away for some months "engaged in certain interests abroad," Mr. Carraway has returned to Rake o' Flaze. His coming synchronised with the appearance of the early morning dew, which indicated that autumn was near at hand. And, of course, we had all heard of the arrival in the village from time to time of certain picture post-cards from foreign parts addressed in the undeniable hand of Septimus to Mrs. Mangel, the gazelle-eyed widow at the Axe and Compasses. Frisky scraps of cardboard were these—decidedly Continental; and we were not at all surprised to find Mrs. Mangel issuing invitations to a tea party a couple of days after Mr. Carraway's rubicund cheeks and peeled nose announced his presence over the quickset hedge of Semolina Cottage.

The gathering in the parlour was a distinct success. Widow Mangel sat enshrined behind an old silver teapot—the picture

of coy matronly contentment in ribboned silk and neat white wristbands. A splendid reproduction of the late Mr. Mangel, in oils, hung on the wall directly over her head. It was the work of a wandering artist who had perpetrated the signboard (an axe *or*, rampant over two compasses couchant upon a field azure, set with stars), and it immortalised the departed in Velasquez touches, as a man of ferocious aspect, with unevenly balanced whiskers and ultramarine eyes anchored unusually near the nose, as if drawn together by an invisible magnet. The aspect of the man was that of prodigious surprise; and as the artist was unable to draw ears with the facility with which he could produce axes and compasses, he had concealed them both in a curling wisp of whisker, thus rendering Ezekiel Mangel, like Daniel Defoe, earless. Exactly opposite the Work sat Mr. Carraway, stirring his tea and attempting pleasantries with the handsome widow queening it behind the teapot. Love was obviously making maelström in his soul in unison with the teaspoon as it whirled round the cup in tinkling melody. As the sugar melted, so did his heart; and it was evident enough that Widow Mangel was not unwilling. Reciprocity beamed in her soft eyes; her plump bosom rose and fell to the pleasant emotion of her heart. Moments of languishment were hers.

* * * * *

"Is your tea to your liking, Mr. Carraway?" said she. "Is it *sweet* enough?" She looked him straight in the eye. He throbbed, and was fashioning an elegant reply, when the threatening features of the outrageous Mr. Mangel smote him into silence. In the shifting afternoon sunlight the narrowed eyes and the bristling whiskers of the oleosmudge on the wall awed him out of his accustomed eloquence, and he stammered some incoherence which meant nothing.

"Are you unwell?" asked the widow in alarm.

"A passing inconvenience," murmured Septimus. "A shadder—a trifling, aching shadder," he said, flashing an angry glance at the portrait, which glowered back, fiercer than ever.

"Try a little drop of Three-star in your tea," said the landlady, kindly. "It must be the outrageous food they give you in foreign parts. My late husband was once in Belgium, and they near pisoned him!" She turned to the portrait, and sighed stormily.

"Ah!" murmured Mr. Peters, helping himself generously to jam. "If there ever *was* a man . . ."

"Ah!" sighed the Company, consolingly. The soft eyes of Widow Mangel swam in the dew of remembrance, and all faces were turned to the picture which now dominated the room, so startlingly alive that Mr. Carraway groaned audibly, and tried in vain not to meet the squint of its eyes.

"If it's stummick-ache," said Mr. Peters, "*If* it's stummick-ache, Mr. Carraway, there's a hinfallible remedy what Mr. Mangel showed me hisself——"

"I assure you it's not that," said Septimus, hastily, anxious to get out of the Mangel atmosphere. "It's gorne now—quite gorne, Mr. Peters!"

* * * * *

The conversation now having turned in the channel of ailments, it became general, as it always does, ranging from corns to consumption, and finishing up in accordance with village custom in harrowing extracts from deathbed scenes and last words. An air of enjoyable sadness prevailed, as with tender melancholy Mrs. Mangel, dabbing her dovelike eyes now and again with a dainty square of lace-edged cambric, described the final moments of her husband.

Through all this catalogue of the here and the hereafter Mr. Carraway's pure passion glowed with heat unquenched; and it was in the passage after tea, with the door closed upon the startled frown of the late Mr. M. and nobody by, that he squeezed amorously the plump hand of the widow, and experienced the inexpressible emotion of a faint answering pressure. But on the way home to Semolina Cottage, though he trod on air, there was ever present in the immediate background the haunting lineaments of the late landlord of the Axe and Compasses, face and frown horribly real; the rest of him a mere shadow, but there.

That night, screwed up to deeds of tremendous desperation, and disguised as a foreigner, Mr. Carraway broke into the parlour of the Axe by way of the back window, and with a deftness that surprised himself, stole the horrible portrait. He made some noise in getting out, and the chill air fetched out of him a rattling sneeze which burst all the louder at his agonised attempt to suppress it. Up shot the bedroom window with a squeal, and out popped the night-capped head of the widow.

"Who is that?" she called, producing at the same time something very like a blunderbuss. Mr. Carraway quaked He felt the Portrait trembling with rage under his arm. But at the supreme moment, courage, reinforced by Love, nerved him.

"*Sh—h—h*, it is I," he whispered. "I—your—your Septimus! Do not be alarmed! I could not sleep, so I came to watch o'er thee! *Susan!*"

He waited trembling for the reply, hiding the proceeds of his burglary behind him as best he could, and wondering if he had put enough of the poetry of passion into that last word—"Susan."

The nightcap shook in the midnight breeze, and presently a soft—very soft—voice trilled sweetly into the night—" Oh, S-S-Septimus, how could you ? "

Then a dog barked, and there was a noise below. Softly the window closed, and in a palsy of fright Mr. Carraway crept away, stifling another shattering sneeze on the verge.

* * * * *

The next morning the sun arose on a newly-made grave at the far end of the Rake o' Flaze allotments on the soft bankside of Rakewater. The late Mr. Mangel had been buried a second time ; and when the news of the daring burglary at the Axe and Compasses reached Semolina Cottage it found the occupier in bed with a dreadful cold, and little Miss Carraway chirping solicitude over a steaming bowl of gruel.

So far, the burglar has not been traced, and the only interesting scrap of news in Rake o' Flaze is the announcement that next Sunday the banns of Septimus Carraway and Susan Mangel will be read for the first time. Susan says that she never realised how lonely widowhood was while she had the protrait of her First to gaze upon. But now—well, it was different, somehow !

" If I ever catch that burglar," she said, " I'll do my best to get him seven years ! "

But Septimus Carraway, caught and condemned to a life sentence, promises to be the most cheerful prisoner ever laid by the heels.

V.

THE DEAD FAIRY

MERCY MERRIT had gone, and with her going one more link which bound Rake o' Flaze to the dim and delightful past has vanished. The Bell has tolled—ninety-three long, solemn strokes; blinds have been pulled down, and in the twilight behind them we have listened, quiet and sad, for the slow-moving steps of the bearers crunching the gravel along Church Lane. As Miss Coy Leveret played the Dead March on the harmonium, her tears splashed on the yellow keys. . . .

Well, well—these things must be! Our dear and charming little Miss Merrit has left us to solve the great Problem. She was a funny little thing, no taller than a small child of great age; ever in a state of bustle and hurry; merry as a sprite, and bubbling over with enthusiasm at the goodness of the Lord. Corkscrew curls dangled at her ears; she had big, bold eyes, like a cock robin's, and there was a way with her when she looked up at you, roguishly, with her head on one side, that was perfectly irresistible.

* * * * *

We children always imagined her as one of the Little People who had been banished (out of spite, no doubt, for some small offence) from Fairyland, and hit upon Rake o' Flaze as the next best place to live in. And reality grew out of that elfin fancy when the dark nights came, and Mercy Merrit would slip out of her tiny cottage with a lantern in her hand (there are no such things as street lamps in Rake o' Flaze), and flit about here and there through the back streets and down by Rakewater.

These grim, hobgoblin nights, which awed us all so terribly, brought never so much as a flutter to little Miss Mercy's big, bold heart. She had no fear. Great fluffy owls, with their sudden and terrifying *whoo-hoop!* and their noiseless tumbling flight; bats with an eerie squeak to their wings; corncrakes making weird "*crrrr's*" in the long grass (like somebody winding up a very old and very stiff grandfather's clock); bogey noises in the tall dark hedgerows; goblin groans in the churchyard, and the thousand other heart-quaking things which happen after the sun has gone to bed, disturbed her not. So it was we children knew that Miss Merrit went out with her lantern and her courageous curls and her chirpy treble to go and chatter with her kindred the fairies among the mushroom rings and the totter-grass, long, long after we were snug beneath the blankets.

* * * * *

In the summer afternoons, when the sun shone, and everything smelt sweet and looked beautiful, and there was nothing at all to be frightened at, Miss Merrit would meet us in some of our long, mysterious adventures of always expectant childhood, and lead us (awestruck and just a weeny bit a-tremble) through the dim, quiet corridors of Solem Wood, where the shadows lay soft over the moss, and the sunshine stole through in shafts of blazing gold. She would show us wonderful birds' nests lined most cunningly with horsehair and feathers. She would whisper and beckon for us to steal up on tip-toe to see the shyest of birds sitting with tail acock and beak up, on the smallest of nests.

She would lead us to quiet pools and show us green-legged, white-crested water-birds, busy over their household affairs or teaching their children to swim; and would find for us strange and marvellous flowers; she knew where the most

gorgeous dragon-flies lived, and told us how, when the world was very much younger, and there was a real Castle at Rake o' Flaze, with drawbridges that let down, and knights and squires and pages and ladies, and Magic, and all that kind of breathless glory—how there were great Dragons living in Solem Wood, and how by that same Magic these fiery monsters were made to shrink and shrink and shrink . . . until the Magic stopped all of its own accord just as the Dragons reached the next-to-nothing-size! And so they remain to-day; and so they will stay for ever-after at next-to-nothing-size unless they discover the opposite-Magic which will make them big again.

* * * * *

"And that, my dears," Mercy would say with a final shake of her corkscrew curls, "is why they are always flying about, *zip-zip*, here, there, and everywhere, looking for the opposite-Magic! Some day, children, one of them may discover it, and they will grow big and fiery again, and go buzzing about with a noise like threshing-drums, with frightful stings in their tails. So you must look out, and be good to your mothers, and know plenty of hymns, and your catechism, and the ten commandments, and the multiplication table; and then you will be safe from all the dragons that ever was! I never heard of a Dragon yet that could swallow any child who knew nine-times-seven and 'Now the day is over'! That's better than all the magic in the world!"

Then would come a fluttering chorus: "Did you know any real, big Dragons, Miss Merrit?"

"Lots, my dears! But they never touched me. Beautiful princesses—not so good as they might be—with golden hair and diamond necklaces, were their food. Poor little Mercy

Merrit was too small and too sour to tempt the appetite of even a baby Dragon!"

So she would go on with her goloptious tales and her quaint—and often beautiful—extravagances, full of fancy and colour and charm, but always with a moral to drive home at the end. There was the story of Nanny Goat gruff, who had to walk seven times over Rakewater bridge to make her voice smooth. In Nanny's time a wicked old Troll, with eyes as big as saucers and nose as long as a poker, lived under the bridge, and poor little Nanny shook it so that the wicked Troll came out and gobbled her all up!

I forget the moral to that tale; but I know it was fine; and I also know that at evening time I always hurried over Rakewater bridge with my heart going pit-a-pat, and never dared to look behind. . . . .

* * * * *

Another thrilling story of Mercy's was the adventure of Cockie-lockie and Co. in the stackyard. One day when Cockie-lockie was scratching under a beanstack a bean fell on his head. With great alarm he ran to tell Henny-penny that the sky was falling. "We must go and tell the King!" said Henny-penny. So off they went, and on their way they met Ducky-daddles and Goosy-gander, who said, "May we come with you?" "Certainly," replied Cockie-lockie and Henny-penny. So off they went to tell the King the sky was falling. On their way they met Foxy-loxy. "*Oho!*" said he, "where are you going, Cockie-lockie, Henny-penny, Ducky-daddles, and Goosy-gander?" "We are going to tell the King the sky is falling," was the reply. "I'll show you the way," said Foxy-loxy. "Oh, thank you," said Cockie-lockie, Henny-penny and Co. So off they went to tell the King the sky was falling; but wicked Foxy-loxy led them to his

lairy-pairy, and gobbled them all up. The moral there is perfectly obvious: "Never make mountains out of mole-hills, my dears!"

* * * * *

Ah, me! Sleep well, Mercy of the corkscrew curls, in thy tiny grave under the old tower. 'Twas thou who showed us children a glorious Wonderland amid the quiet dells and the whispering trees and the nodding flowers of the dearest village in the world. If thy kinsfolk the fays have not flown off with the soul of thee in a fairy casket to their own Hereafter, we may yet meet again in another and a more wonderful Wonderland high about the silver music of the stars. Thy place will be among the tiny angels, telling them sweet tales of feathered fairy lore, while the staid, elder saints strum harps and make themselves generally useful in the Heaven of the grown-ups.

VI.

AN "AT HOME."

MRS. ANSTRUTHER DE CRESPIGNY, who kept servants and had her dresses from London, thought it would be so nice to sow the seeds of Sociability in Rake o' Flaze. The autumn evenings were getting long and dark, and bibulous hilarity often sang somewhat discordantly in the snug parlour of the Axe and Compasses. Mrs. de Crespigny met Mr. Wanks one evening. "Don't you think, Mr. Wanks," she said sweetly, "that something might be done to occupy the mind of Rake o' Flaze during the winter nights?" Mr. Wanks scratched his head. "Strong drink is a Mocker, Mum," he said. "But it ain't arf bad, Mum. If you was a-hoein' turmits all day,

Mum, you 'ave no idea as how a pot of four ale would slither down ! " Mrs. de Crespigny did not debate the point. She simply said that she had been thinking about having a series of social evenings at her house—and inviting the Village. Light refreshments, coffee, conversation, and music ! In the drawing-room ! ! " What do you think of it, Mr. Wanks ? " said the lady of Rake o' Flaze, triumphantly. " Mum," replied Mr. Wanks in a solemn whisper, " it simply takes my breath away. Did you say in the ***drorin'***-room ? "

* * * * *

In half an hour this new item of social intelligence had spread all over Rake o' Flaze—as Mrs. de Crespigny intended it should. Excitement was intense, and a day or two later little gilt-edged cards were circulated in the village. Mr. Wanks was so struck with the tone of the thing that he had his framed, straight away. It was beautifully simple :

Mrs. Anstruther de Crespigny
Requests the honour of the company of
Mr. Wanks
to a social evening on Oct. 30th.
Music. R.S.V.P.

" London " Wimple had one, and grew so excited over it that he let the forge fire go out. Young Critty and his wife had one, and so did the postman and the policeman, the butcher, the baker, and the rotund landlord of the Axe and Compasses. At the suggestion of Mr. Wanks (this was before Mr. W.'s marriage, by the way) they all met at the Axe, and discussed the invitation in strict committee. With awe and pride each invitation card was drawn out and handed round for inspection—delicately.

" I should like to know what the lady means by

' R.S.V.P.' " said " London," in a tone of great perplexity, as he lit one of the famous twopennies.

" Strikes me," suggested Mr. Wanks, who possesses a fair knowledge of most things, " that it stands for grub and victuals. It *might* mean Rhubarb, Sherbet, Veal, and Pertaters—or summat like that. There ain't no knowin'."

Young Critty shook his head. " I reckon," said he, " that it's some furrin Greek, or sich, meaning ' peace to this 'ere house '—they do that there sort of things in Society, yer know. Anyway it ain't for the likes of us to say what it is. We must accep' the hinvertation." The meeting agreed; and after much discussion it was decided to reply to Mrs. Anstruther de Crespigny in the form of a Round Robin.

* * * * *

Mr. Wanks made a brilliant suggestion. " *We'll* stick some capital letters at the bottom of our Reply ! " he said. " Hear, hear ! " said the Meeting. " Er course, it's the proper thing to do," said the postman, whose daily acquaintance with letters established him as an authority on the arts and graces. So, after the spoiling of many pens and the blotting of many sheets of special cream-laid, the following Reply was at last formulated :

" WE, the hereinafter undermentioned signatories send our best respecks to Mrs. Anstruther de Crespigny, and beg to state, contrairy to what appears on your card, Ma'm, that there is no *honour* at all in your receiving the likes of us. On the other hand, ours is the honour, which we beg leave to state is very great, and shall be most happy and *honoured* by accepting of your kind invitation.

(Signed)

[Here followed the Rake o' Flaze signatures]

E.T.C., Y.M.H.S."

I must give Mr. Wanks his due by explaining that the main structure of this letter was built up by him. "Anyways," said he, surveying his work with great pride, "we've got three more capital letters in *our* little lot. An' there's a sentiment, not too forward-like, nor not too grovellin', what I reckon would appeal to the 'ighest in the land—'Ever to Command; Your Most Humble Servants!' If that ain't as good as 'R.S.V.P.' any day, I'll eat my hat—meanin', er course, no offence to Mrs. de C.!"

* * * * *

Mrs. de C. was delighted when the reply came; and when at last October 30th dawned there was more excitement in Rake o' Flaze than in all the rest of the country villages put together. The matter of Dress perplexed some. The policeman wasn't quite sure whether it was the right thing to go in his uniform or in his Sunday clothes. Nobody else knew. "Toss up for it," suggested Critty, who was a man of ideas. "Heads, uniform; Tails, Sunday clothes." It was Heads. "*And* white gloves—don't forget that," said Mr. Wanks. "Us civilians'll have to wear kids. Them as has got patent leathers must wear 'em; them as hasn't, see that their blackin' shines well." The postman did not exactly follow the example of the policeman. He wore his official trousers with the red stripe; but his coat was a black clawhammer. The mystic word "*Music*" in the corner of his card didn't escape his eagle eye. He thought it would hardly be the thing to pay a Society call with his euphonium under his arm; so he ordered his young brother to bring it on to Mrs. de Crespigny's house later on in the evening.

* * * * *

Billy Easton, who is nothing if not a thorough sportsman, appeared in riding breeches and very squeaky boots. Young

Critty and his wife wore their wedding garments for the second time. Mr. Wanks came in a top hat (which he removed, very correctly, as soon as he got inside the hall), brown boots, pepper-and-salts, and dark grey suédes. He was not quite sure as to whether, when he reached the drawing-room, he ought to remove the gloves. He kept them on until he grew so hot, through perturbation, that taking them off was an absolute impossibility. "London" walked in boldly, but with just that spice of humility necessary for the occasion. "Won't you sit down?" said Mrs. de C. in her most winning tones. "If it's all the same to you, Ma'm, I'd rather stand," said "London."

* * * * *

I am told (for I was not honoured with an invitation) that the first Social Evening at Mrs. de Crespigny's was so successful that she decided not to have any more. There was claret cup and sandwiches; music, a speech by the Vicar, and a military recitation from Kipling by the Major (who had to alter all the swear-words to suit the culture of his audience) The policeman appeared in full uniform. He looked so official that some of the guests felt quite uncomfortable. One little incident must bring this chronicle to a close. Just as Miss Clare Symons was singing the very soft part of "Daddy," Sarah, the servant, knocked at the drawing-room door, and emerged—trying to balance a blushing euphonium upon her tray.

"Please, Mum," she said, as it fell with a crash, "it's the postman's!"

VII.

THE FÊTE.

On the eve of harvest we had our Fête at Rake o' Flaze In my younger days we didn't call it that ; but circumstances have marched on with moving Time, the village school has got " Provided " printed up over the door ; and education having spurred us all on to the appreciation of foreign tongues, cordiality of entente, and what not, we called it a Fête ; and with the assistance of His Reverence's dictionary (for there was some trouble over the propriety of the circumflex where large capitals are concerned) we announced it as such on the Village Pump, the blacksmith's front door, and other places more or less observable and public.

The weather was not at all agreeable. It rained and blew rather viciously in the morning ; the afternoon sky looked much like carelessly-poached eggs—curiously reminiscent of Turner's " Slave Ship," which reminded the American newspaper reporter of a tortoise-shell cat having a fit in a platter of tomatoes. The yellow corn sang in the wind like the music of fine shingle when the tide is going out ; the Union Jack flapped like washing on the line over the squat church tower, and we were all ready and awaiting the arrival of the Wigglesworth Silver Prize Band to open the proceedings in the Vicarage field with gay and festive strains. It arrived very late, dusty and bruised, by reason of a wheel having come off Blinks's brake half-way down Mark's Hill. There was a gash in the stomach of the big drum, the E flat euphonium had lost its mouthpiece, and the solo cornet gentleman had shattered the nail of the finger with which he does all the twiddly-bits. So we had to solace the band with beer and diachylum ; and his Reverence, who owns a motor-bike,

doctored the drum with his tyre-mending apparatus—with more solution than success. A wonderful man, our Vicar.

* * * * *

One village fête is much like another. This was—in streaks. All the farmers from a wide district turned up with their wives and families, sportively dressed, but excessively gloomy, as farmers and humorists invariably are. We had tea in a tent which had blown down twice during the morning with nearly fatal results. But we were not afraid. We paid our sixpences and courted death with unmoved countenances. We were rather mournful, the general demeanour being suggestive of a death in the family. I suppose it was because we were all dressed in our Sunday clothes, with high collars and hard hats fitting where they touched. Conversation sparkled. From two ends of the county Mr. William Sproggins, of Tickleham Farm, and Mr. William Dew, of the Pastures, met across the bread-and-butter slabs.

"Arternoon, Will'um!"

"Arternoon, Will'um!"

"How do?"

"How's y'self?" . . . (Long silence. Much tea.)

"How's Joe?"

"Oh, middlin', middlin'."

"And how's 'is old 'oog?"

"Middlin'."

There was much inquiry about Joe and his hog. They had evidently passed through some dreadful ordeal, some fearful temptation; and even now were only middlin'. Dear, dear!

* * * * *

The main incident of the tea was Mr. Pudden Peters. In his early days they nicknamed him "Pudden," because of his extraordinary fondness for such; and as Pudden he will

remain to the end of the chapter. I don't believe anybody in Rake o' Flaze knows his Christian name; and since Mr. Mew's cow got into the church and committed sacrilege by eating the parish register from 1861 to 1880, there is no written record of it anywhere except at Somerset House and in the private case-book of the Recording Angel. Mr. Peter's fame stretches beyond the county boundary. When his Aunt Jane was married to Trot Tompkins, the cottage of the bride was so small that it was necessary to have "three settin's down" to the sub-nuptial feast to accommodate all the guests. Pudden was at each, and suffered no discomfort beyond having to cut away the buttons of his trousers, which (because of previous digestional disasters) had been sewn on with wax-end. In these same trousers Pudden appeared at our Fête —a wide man with big, nobby buttons to his coat, which made him look very much like an old-fashioned chest of drawers with a bulge to 'em. He seemed to hold as much for his six-pence; and if the tent hadn't blown down for the third time, it would have been necessary to cut the wax-end once again.

As the afternoon wore on, what with the accident on Mark's hill and the sticking-plaster *and* the beer, the band failed to come up to expectations; and we were somewhat alarmed at the beginning of the Sports to hear the preparations for the three-legged race heralded by the solemn strains of the "Dead March" in *Saul*.

"Hullo!" said John the sexton, whose familiarity with brief life and its consequences made him cognisant of popular funereal airs. "Hullo! There's Pudden Peters gorne and bursted 'isself at last. I warned 'im about them trousers! Poor ole Pudden!"

However, Pudden was intact. The band explained that the "Dead March" was put on to give the injured drum a chance. But the music grew jerkier and gloomier; and when

the " Merry Widow " was turned on, the double-bass, with his walrus moustache buried in the wide mouthpiece of his instrument, went to sleep, so. Occasionally he opened a fishy, vacant eye, and put in a blast or two by sheer guesswork.

* * * * *

Mr. Peters was the hero of the Sports, as he was of the Tea. Peters and Mush won the three-legged race for heavy-weights. An anxious crowd (including the doctor) assembled at the winning post to see Pudden explode when he fell under the tape. But, thanks to the wax-end, the human chest of drawers held together, though poor Mush was badly crushed as the bulky pair rolled like lashed porpoises on the Green. " I *tried* to fall soft," explained Pudden, apologetically, as the flattened Mr. Mush wiped the tears from his eyes protestingly.

The Smelling Competition produced hilarity—and more tears. Twelve black bottles, each containing liquid, had to be sniffed at and their contents guessed—vinegar, rum, beer, colza oil, sour milk, black currant tea (which smelt like a newly-opened vault), ammonia, methylated spirit, pig's swill, whisky, water, and cold tea. The ammonia laid most of the competitors out; they couldn't even smell their familiar " swill " after that. Mr. Peters took a mighty sniff of the ammonia (which would have strangled most people outright), and then said that it reminded him of summat—he couldn't exactly say what. Summat faint!

" Guess something," urged Miss Dolly, manageress of the sniff department.

Pudden took another war-horse snort at the bottle.

" Castor oil! " said he, desperately.

" Blow me if it ain't harmonia! " cried Mr. Mush—and so won the prize.

Just as we were really beginning to enjoy ourselves the Turneresque skyscape turned black in the face and the deluge burst. It was a great shame, for Pudden was getting into his stride for the cracknel-eating and ginger beer drinking competition, with the betting 5 to 1 on Pudden, and the rest nowhere. I shook hands, commiseratingly, with Mr. Peters; it was like shaking hands with a boxing-glove.

* * * * *

"Better luck next time, Mr. Peters!"

"Next year," said Pudden sorrowfully. "Ah!"

Much may happen in twelve months. . . . Even Explosions! There was Fatality in the glint of Pudden's pale round eye.

VIII.

THE PIOUS FRAUD.

THE little minister of Rake o' Flaze died the other day. We buried him in a quiet corner of the churchyard under the skeleton boughs of a great elder-bush, where, when Spring is here and the blossoms are out, the thrushes make sweet melody at daybreak and at dusk. A plot could not be found for him in the chapel burying-ground. It has long been overfull, with the ancient gravestone of soft stone and flaky slate nudging each other's humped shoulders in the twilight of the trees. Though we all knew that he looked askance at sleeping in earth over which a mitred bishop had waved white fingers, we did our best for him, knowing that under the elder there would be a peaceful bed for him, and that the choir of birds would make him glad.

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He came to the village many years ago—a strange, small man with a face (so it seemed to us) branded with the fierce iron of the old Puritan inquisitors. His hair, spattered with grey, was brushed severely back from his pale forehead, disclosing a well-defined "peak"; his nose was long and straight, with an habitual twitch to it which threw dancing, elfin shadows across his stiff upper lip in the yellow light of the pulpit hanging-lamps—a clean-shaven lip, long, and lying like a fold pressed hard over his teeth. On cold days it was blue, as though frost had pinched it. The rest of his face was extraordinarily hairy. From his high cheekbones sprouted a fan-shaped beard of such luxuriance that it seemed to draw all the sap from his face for its continual nourishment. So he was always pallid; pale with a delicate bluish tint, like the shell of a duck's egg. His brows were shaggy, affording such jutting eaves to his eyes, and casting such deep shadows, that it was hard to tell whether the eyes themselves were harbours of fire or of water. They often gleamed, but under the influence of which element none could tell.

The rest of him was mean—mean to smallness. His body was so frail that we used to laugh at him as he struggled up the street on blustering days of March weather. But for his little bowed legs, with which Nature in one of her kindly-freakish moods had endowed him, he would have been whisked away in the shouting gusts many a time, to whirl with the hen-feathers and the straw across the Green, and so on, to the fretting bosom of Rakewater, where the witches (they say) still ride and scream among the willows when the moon is full and the little world of Rake o' Flaze sleeps. . . .

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On the windiest days he never lost his hat—an absurd pancake of black felt—and we used to wonder how on earth

he kept it on, until a sportive gust blew his whiskers aside one morning, and disclosed the tight band of white elastic under his chin. He lived in a Jack-built little parsonage perched at the edge of the chapel yard, rent free and draughty. With fervour he prayed, " Give us this day our daily bread " ; his sole income was the morning and evening collection—small coins dropped reluctantly upon the dull old pewter plates held at the doors by Ezekiel Lumbers and Jerry Lamb, grim elders of Bethel.

There are one hundred and fifty men, women, and children in Rake o' Flaze. The nearest squire lives seven miles away, and he is a gymnosophist, and hopeless. Besides the chapel there is an Established church, and a " Room " for the solemn meetings of the Plymouth Brethren—" The Rocks " as they call them hereabouts. Thus, Nature was again kind in fashioning the little gentleman in a tiny mould. There is an art in subsisting upon next-to-nothing : he did it. But, day by day, month by month, year by year, he lived briskly, benignly for God and man. Everybody knew him as " The Little Man." His name was rarely spoken in Rake o' Flaze.

He made a dour beginning with us. On the very first Sunday morning of his " call " his sermon jarred on righteous ears, and set the bonnet-bugles in the foremost pews rattling ominously. It was a simple discourse of easy eloquence, fresh as a mountain stream. It told of the sun in the sky, and the wind in the trees, the brightness of flowers, the music of the fields in summer, the majestic mystery of the stars on a clear night. There was happiness in every sentence, and a sound moral tacked neatly and unobtrusively on at the end. Not a breath of hell-fire ! Not a single whiff of sulphur ; no gnashing of teeth ; no tears ; no torments ; but just down-right cheerfulness—*cheerfulness* !

But the children up in the gallery were all as quiet as mice, and the smell of peppermints among them was so faint that it was scarcely noticeable. For the first time they had discovered that there were beautiful things, and things wonderful around them and above them in their own small world. They had never thought before of the why or the wherefore of the sun or the wind or the rain or the clouds—they were just *there!* But the elders, with their land-locked imagination and their life-long thirst for the bitters of the Baptist faith, chewed their beards and snorted angrily. Ezekiel Lumbers and a few of the chosen met the new pastor in the vestry afterwards, and told him that such heathen stuff would not do for Rake o' Flaze.

"There's too much curds and whey in thy handling of Holy things, sir," said the old grocer, speaking (as was his habit) through the starboard slit of his thin lips. "Nothin' to grit your teeth at. Your words belie the Covenant out o' y'r countenance, minister! We expected something fiery . . . and my wife, she says that the name o' God only passed y'r lips once in all the entire discourse! That won't do for the Chapel, sir—it's blasphemious!"

* * * * *

A strange light blazed for a moment under the thatch of the pastor's brows; but he replied to the deputation with a modest sentence of apology. "My friends," he said, "with so many children in the gallery this morning, I withheld that part of my sermon dealing with—er—damnation. I substituted what I thought would be a more fitting theme. But I promise you, you shall have it to-night, gentlemen!"

"And don't forget God!" commanded Ezekiel, shaking a warning finger in the minister's face, as he and his brethren departed.

And so it came to pass that the new shepherd of these surly rams walked sadly across to the parsonage, dined frugally with his wife, and broke the news of his failure to her over a chip of cheese.

The lady wept a little, and murmured, " Oh, Archibald, what are you going to do, dear ? "

" I'm going to give 'em Hell to-night, Sarah ! " he replied, with a grim smile. Then he moved off to his small study, destroyed the sermon he had carefully prepared for the evening, and took down a well-thumbed Thesaurus from the shelves of his scanty library. He was ever a careful man in his choice of epithets and phrases. He made a neat list of scorching words — Pandemonium, Abaddon, Domdaniel, Tartarus, Hades, Avernus, Pit of Acheron, Gehenna, Cocytus, Rhadamanthus, Erebus, Tophet—and then set himself down to evolve a discourse from the text :

Weeping . . . wailing . . . gnashing !

In the vestry he swallowed a prairie oyster to give tone to his utterances . . .

At the end of an hour he had that little chapel rocking under the whirl of his scorpion phrases ; but he would not be satisfied until he saw the tears trickling down the blanched face of Mr. Lumbers, and until (at " Thirdly, my brethren—Gnashing ! ") he observed Jerry Lamb trembling and fumbling furtively at his toothless gums. A blue haze seemed to fill the Bethel. Through it, Archibald pounded and sweated at his terrible task. He broke the shade of one of the pulpit lamps ; one foot went through the bottom of the inverted soap-box on which he stood to make him taller ; his notes were scattered to the winds, so that in the stress of his emotion he forgot to bring in that grand word " Domdaniel."

Then he crept away into the night, and prayed to God—*his* God, merciful and benignant, to forgive him.

IX.

BATTLE ROYAL.

MARRIED *v.* Single is always an event at Rake o' Flaze. Our cricket ground is a sort of mixture of Lord's and the Oval, though necessarily more parochial in the matter of size. There is also a pond in it, very duck-weedy and tadpoley, and in the thick ooze of its bed lie the mouldering remains of many prime match-balls. It marks the leg-boundary; and as every Rake o' Flaze hit is a leg-hit—except by accident—the annual encounter was quite expensive in the matter of leather until our champion slogger, Jimmy, the blacksmith, died. In '99, the year of his prime, Jimmy hit seven 6's into that pond; and in running backwards to save the seventh—and the very last ball in the village—Pudden Peters fell in, and but for his generous adiposity, which made an aerostat of him (in a manner of speaking), would have drowned.

Jimmy's prowess invariably won the day for the Singles; but this year the Marrieds stood a good chance, because of the deadly bowling abilities of Mr. Mush, whose leg-break was—well . . . you wouldn't believe it if I told you! But then, you don't know our ground. Like the German airship of the Eastern Counties of our beloved Homeland, it must be seen to be believed.

This Whitsun it was better than usual—much better. It had been well scythed by Trot Tompkins (who is an uncertain back-stop because of his bow-legs), and after that the amiable Mrs. Trot had gone over a yard or two at the wicket-ends most carefully with a pair of sheep-shears until those critical portions of the pitch bore the apologetic appearance of a three days' growth of very fierce whiskers. To complete the

preparation, Trot, in his proud rôle of groundman, had emptied a dozen pails of water (and several thousand protesting tadpoles) over the bumpy parts, which he afterwards whacked as flat as possible with a "beetle." And there you are!

It was a lovely day, and the whole village turned out to see the sport. A fierce sun blazing upon the close-clipped pitch had unfortunately brought out Trot's enemies, the bumps, so that more water and more "beetling" were necessary. Even with this extra treatment, they looked like gigantic blisters on the verge of bursting. Most of our old friends appeared in the proud regalia of their Sunday clothes, to do or die at the wicket. Mr. Carraway was there, with his bright blue trousers flashing defiance at the distant nadir. He had borrowed a bat with a musically-sprung handle, and in spite of his bulk he looked the essence of nimbleness in his tight elastic-sided new boots, with the uttermost end of his cerulean nethers tucked into a pair of snow-white woollen socks. His love affair had blossomed to the extent of his being asked in Church twice; and the Marrieds wanted to claim him as one of them—being a man short. The difficulty was solved by the genial Mr. C. offering himself as Jack o' Both-sides. Being the oldest bachelor on the ground, he was appointed captain of the Singles as well, and he tossed up with Demon Mush for the choice of innings. The half-sovereign he spun airily disappeared down a mouse-hole, and as no amount of prodding and delving could disinter it, his side was allowed first innings for consolation.

Amid carolling cheers Mr. Carraway and Mr. Peters strolled to the wickets, after a long and mysterious disappearance of the former behind a blackberry bush. He emerged at last with a pad affixed saucily to his right leg, and was walking stiffly to his fate, when Trot Tompkins called him back.

"Hi! Mr. Carraway, sir!" he shouted, "you've got yer pad on the wrong leg!"

Mr. Carraway paused, blushed, and stammered. A splutter of amusement reached him from the packed ranks of spectators. With a gigantic effort of sheer nerve the great man covered his confusion with a masterful reply.

"It's all right," he said, with stately dignity, "*I'm left-legged*!"

None but Mr. Carraway would have thought of that. And he lived up to it, brilliantly. Only those right-handed batsmen who have tried, know how hard it is to stand at the crease before a Demon Bowler, with the right leg foremost, as Mr. Carraway stood. But he did it, and when the first ball came down with a whizz, and struck one of the watered bumps with a "squishy" noise like a wet sponge, Mr. Carraway closed his eyes behind his spectacles and smote so fiercely that the bat left his nervous grasp and soared heavenwards like a lark.

"*Run!*" cried Pudden, at the other end.

"Where?" answered the bewildered batsman, as the ball sped like a rifle bullet through the back-stop's bowed legs.

"To t'other end!" panted Pudden, now up in Mr. Carraway's territory. So Mr. Carraway ran—ran a two amid shrieks of delight—found his bat, and stood breathless in safety once more.

"Spit on yer 'ands next time, and then you'll be able to 'old the bat, Mr. Carraway," said the umpire generously.

"Play!" called Mr. Mush; and to his astonishment, Mr. Carraway hit the next ball, though he hadn't the least idea where. It went up in the air, miles and miles and miles, and six men ran to the middle of the pitch to catch it, cannoned,

and fell in a glorious muddle—and Mr. Carraway ran two more.

The third ball, getting up like greased lightning, struck him amidships; and with a groan he fell, and the subsequent proceedings interested him no more. He explained afterwards to a sympathetic congregation in the tent—to a favoured few of the male sex, to whom he showed the bruise—that the accident was due to the fact that he could not see the ball properly, as he had put his reading-glasses on in mistake. There were other disasters, as the score shows, due, no doubt, to Demon bowling on a treacherous wicket. Thus:

SINGLES.

S. Carraway (J.O.B.S.), retired hurt	2
P. Peters, retired hurt..	0
Nurrish, retired hurt	0
Rev. Harris, retired hurt	0
W. Sloggins, hit wkt.	1
P. Mew, lbw. (he had no pads on and is lame for life), b Mush..	3
A. N. Other, run out	0
F. Montgomery, Emmanuel Peters, Archibald Tippler, and G. Blurton funked it after this	0
Byes	57
No balls	31
Total	94

When the Marrieds went in, it was clear that the only thing to do was to keep the pace of the bowling down, so the Singles put on Mr. Sloggins to bowl his slow underarm daisy-cutters. At sundown the score read:

MARRIEDS.

S. Carraway (J.O.B.S.), absent hurt	0
Hezekiah Mush, not out	83
T. Tompkins, st. A. N. Other, b Rev. Harris..	1
W. Winkles, c Peters (hit him in a soft part, and when he grabbed at the place to ease the pain he found the ball there), b Sloggins	4
J. Blower, hit wkt.	0
W. Z. Mew, not out	5
Byes	0
No balls	1
Total (for 4 wkts.) ..	94

At that interesting state of the score the sudden entry of a herd of black bullocks into the field closured the proceedings and the game ; and the stumps were drawn.

X.

MR. CARRAWAY'S PARTY.

WE, the horny-handed sons of toil, have not overmuch to occupy us now that the long nights are at hand. The threshing is over, the hens are moulting, there's only one service at church with the parson on holiday and the plumbers in ; the chrysanthemum season is unexciting ; and since Mother Mew's quinsey carried her off to a better land on Michaelmas Day, conversation on cheerful topics has languished in Rake o' Flaze. So it was with much joy that we—the Elect of the

village—received gilt-edged cards in real print, with blank spaces left for handwriting embellishments, announcing:

Mr. and Miss Carraway,
At home, 7.30 p.m.,
Semolina Cottage.
Progressive. . . . Supper.
R.S.V.P.

Two words at the bottom—*carriages at*—were crossed out as being much too aristocratic. There is no false pride in the Carraways, though they have taken the new red-brick house at the bottom of the village and christened it after the commodity which brought Septimus Carraway his gold and his sister Caroline her peace of mind. Modesty is one of their many virtues.

* * * * *

I may say at once that the Carraways are newcomers to Rake o' Flaze. They are not soaked in our village traditions —yet. But they are simple souls, anxious to please and eager for anything which may tend to the public good. Only the other day, the Aggressive Abstainers' Gospel Union came and gave us a blazing, pyrotechnic revival on the village green. Swaying under the habitual influence of the vine, old William Wafer (Rake o' Flaze's choice alcoholic exhibit), taunted the long-bearded preacher who was holding forth all about the Isle of Patmos.

Septimus was in the crowd; and at the end of the address he electrified us all by leaping upon the rostrum and calling upon the egregious William to repent. His eyes blazed through his tremendous spectacles, his beard wagged, he flung his arms semaphorically skyward and gushed into sudden, torrential prayer.

" O Lord ! " cried he, " prevail upon brother William to shun the foamin' cup ! Shower down blessin's upon his head. Rousify him, O Lord ; rousify him ! Anoint him with the ile of Patmos ! "

At the end, brother William was a groaning, beer-logged hulk of regrets and repentance, and declared that on Saturday night he'd get the carrier to bring him a gallon of that there ile from the county town.

So you see, Mr. Carraway was something of an original ; we itched to know more of the man, and cheerfully accepted the invitation. The fact that the blank space after the word " Progressive " was filled in with the magic talisman " Supper" was consoling. I'll admit that the mysterious letters R.S.V.P. at the bottom of the Carraway carte worried us a bit, until Mr. Pudden Peters (fatter than ever, since our famous fête) solved the problem by discovering a hidden menu in the Mystery. Thus :

Rabbit
Sausages
Veal
Pudding.

It wasn't quite that, after all, but we had a gorgeous time. Mr. Carraway welcomed us with open arms. He wore the only frock coat in Rake o' Flaze, a flowered waistcoat, and cerulean pantaloons.

* * * * *

A huge apron covered these nether garments, somewhat marring the effect. 'Twas only when Septimus, beady with hospitable perspiration, raised from time to time this modest drop-curtain to blot his brow, that we caught fleeting glimpses of the blue—flashes of a midsummer sky between scurrying thundercloud. Like belated travellers, we longed for more.

When the full company had assembled we played whist, and draw-the-well-dry, and old-maids. This necessitated much changing of seats, and consequent consternation in the soul of Pudden, from whose neighbourhood from time to time echoed detonations and crashes announcing the painful fact (simultaneous with the sudden disappearance of Mr. Perkins' roseate face from its wonted elevation above the festive board) that another chair had collapsed.

"Oh!" cried dear little Miss Carraway, at every clatter; "Oh—oh—oh!" There was trouble in her canary chirp.

"It's all right, mum," said the gallant Pudden, when his breath returned, "I fall sorft, mum!"

As a special treat, Mr. Carraway brought out his "Sympholium" from the best bedroom. "I don't play cards, friends all," said he; "but I'm a regular whale on 'ymns!" He wound up the clockwork and gave us that beautiful ditty, "Oh, where is my Wandering Boy to-night?"—the only thing apparently that the Sympholium knew. Gaps in the clockwork machinery presented the tuneful boy in a more wandering vein than ever—

> "Oh! Clunk is my boy to-night,
> Clunk Clunk is my Clunk, Clunk, Clunk.
> The wind blows cold
> And he's clink, clank, ping old.
> Oh! where is clunk Boy to-brrrup!"

"It wants a little ile, I'm thinkin'," said Mr. Carraway, bending over the Wandering Boy, and so displaying a vast acreage of blue hinterland.

"Ile of Patmos!" whispered Miss Coy Leveret, who had heard the tale of William and his alcoholic whimsies.

* * * * *

The R.S.V.P. half-time came at last. Tarts as big as dinner-plates and cheesecakes not like our own little Rake o' Flaze delicacies, but as big as the tarts, and most marvellously flavoured. The *pièce de resistance* was a cake as big as a small haystack, and so spicy that its flavour reminded Miss Coy Leveret (who has travelled) of the Mummy Room in the British Museum. For beverage there was Aunt Emily's plum wine—a liquor of such prodigious strength that after her second glass Miss Leveret found sudden eloquence and paid Mr. Perkins so many compliments that the shy undertaker sat harder and harder on his sixth chair, praying for another cataclysm. It came not, for Miss Carraway had sentenced Pudden to perpetual banishment upon a desert island of horsehair and mahogany, warranted to defy even his massy avoirdupois.

At midnight Mr. Carraway was smitten aghast with the sudden recollection that he "hadn't gorne and shet up the hens." He clapt on a top-hat and vanished into the black maw of night. We heard cluckings and squawkings . . . and then nothing more. We waited and waited; we had some more of the Wandering Boy; a few more giant cheesecakes; another nip or so of the deadly concoction of Aunt Emily . . . still no sign of Septimus.

"Oh—oh!" cried dear little Miss Carraway. "Has he drownded hisself in the duckpond? Oh—oh!"

The suspense was awful.

We quenched the Wandering Boy, and sat in tragic silence round the room, like mourners, with a Corpse upstairs!

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Presently, through the ceiling came a weird noise as if a ghostly carpenter was sawing at a spectral plank—

'Twas the nasal music of Mr. Carraway, snug in bed and fast asleep.

On the way home in the Eastons' bullock wagon the general company agreed with Miss Coy Leveret that as a polite and subtle purveyor of the quiet hint, Mr. Carraway was supreme and sublime.

"A nod is as good as a wink any day—or night," said she, with her eyes twinkling rivalry to the quiet stars at every bump of the homeward-bound barouche.

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We have hopes of Mr. Carraway this winter. I'm convinced that before the year is out he will become One of Us.

RANDOM SKETCHES.

RANDOM SKETCHES

I.

PORTRAIT OF A GENTLEMAN.

THE sunrise shines upon my window, and before the world is up to scent the autumn morning a starling comes out from his bedroom under the ridge-tiles to talk to himself. He begins very softly—just a whisper, with now and then a "chink-chink" in it, as though somewhere concealed among his feathers there lies a little net-purse of gold, and he is shaking it. There is no other sound but his. Below me, London is still fast asleep, unconscious and careless of the wonders that are piling up out of the East; for this is a Monday morning, and last night the Edgware Road, full of the clotted heaviness of a lax week-end, rolled into bed with the seal of the Dustman stamped hard upon her eyelids, and will not wake for hours. The sky glows and brightens in the windless dawn. Flashes of silver stream across heaven like quick fishes moving in a shallow pool. An arrow-tip of light burns upon my window-pane, and the starling, aroused from his reverie, is moved to change his tune. He is a bachelor bird; I have known him all the summer—mateless, but in no way forlorn. He goes his own way in solitary dignity, with a limp, and an expression in his rapid eye so wise and so wary, and so

eminently conscious of the frailties of the sex, that I am not surprised at his choice of company. The limp is due to a meeting between him and a cat named "Wiskin"—my cat, whose shredded ear is a perpetual advertisement of her unwise adventure. The two now hold conversations, at a respectful distance, upon the leads on sunny mornings. They understand one another perfectly.

There are many other starlings among the housetops here. Until a week or two back they were all busy over household duties, and as shy of mankind as most family birds are during the summer. In pairs, they have been looking after the nursery, all in a perplexing flutter of excitement. They have lived through anxious weeks in perpetual paroxysms of housekeeping. Every chimney top has harboured a pair—husband and wife—who have been disappearing through incredibly small cracks in the plaster, and emerging again like conjuring tricks, fearful and silent, with a finger-on-lip attitude—"*Shhh! Is anybody looking? Are we observed?*" And at each disappearance there would arise a clamour of hissing as though the whole chimney were packed with compressed steam. In vain have been the precautions and the deceptions practised by papa and mamma; the hiss of their ravenous brood could be heard half-a-mile away when the day was quiet.

My battered friend has had none of these excitements and anxieties, and as I watch him this morning in the silver dawn he displays himself—all unaware that he is being catalogued—as the perfect embodiment of the contented gentleman. He is somewhat careless of his dress, for he has no need to make a show to please his Clarissa. He is shaggy indeed, if a bird can be called shaggy. There is a frill to his tail, too, which cannot be denied, for he has a persistent habit of flicking it against the meshed wires of the burglar-puzzler which

isolates my leads from those next door, and on which he spends some hours of the morning. Only once a year has he a new suit; on the first of June, or thereabouts, he comes out (somewhat shamefacedly, and to the indignant astonishment of "Wiskin") in clothes of a cut and a sheen that make of him a strutting popinjay. His coat is gold-laced and cut away in the most spry Bond Street manner, his waist glows "all tight and shiny," his neckcloth is a most magnificent array of colours—purple, ultramarine, the green of the sea, with here and there a touch of white foam fringing it—and it is folded, too, with all the careful artistry of D'Orsay.

The image of my rapscallion bird choosing his neckwear and pirouetting before a mirror in the grand manner of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree is really too absurd. He is the very embodiment of Sir Fopling Flutter, old Etheredge's "disinterested coxcomb"; but he is more than that, for while Sir Fopling thought his tailor or peruke-maker the greatest man in the world, my friend up there on the burglar-puzzler is a confirmed philosopher, man of the world, and minstrel.

Though once a year sublime Nature insists upon tailoring him, it is clear enough to see that he prefers to be a thing of shreds and patches—a tousled troubadour, never so happy as when he is making music, his ragged body all athrill with the deliciousness of it, phantom gold clinking in his purse, and the throat of him gurgling precious nonsense to the dawn. This is the time of year and this is the time of day when his music is sweetest and his thrilling rhapsodies most enchanting. He sings to please himself, and because he cannot help it, my tattered troubadour. Look at him now, standing tiptoe on the very top of London! First, he looks round in that crafty sideways manner of his, to see if his tattered-eared lady friend is anywhere about. No? He chuckles—slaps his

sides with his ragged wings—the chuckles deepen to rich gurgles. Then he tries a scale to see if his morning voice is in order; then comes arpeggios in clattering gallops of sound as clear and as forceful as a Chopin *Fantasia;* and then, as the flashing darts of the dawn leap across the housetops, setting all the Eastern windows aflame, his melody clashes and rings in triumphant harmony.

"Shaking his little castanets,"

sang Tennyson; but our Laureate never lay abed in the soundless day-dawn to hearken to the music of this eloquent singer close at hand, or he would have had more to set his rhymes to. The starling on a clear autumn morning is more than a soloist, more than a player on the bones (though my beloved vagabond carries at times very much the manner of the "corner man"); he is monologist, soloist, concert, and choir all in one. Hark at him now—look at him! He is alive—illuminated with the melody that flowed from his very soul in clamouring cascades. Surely will he awake the sons and daughters of Pharaoh who are sleeping across the way behind the shuttered casements of Maida Vale, or the Seven never slumbered deeper than they! He goes on with his theme—the *motif* in clear notes, rich and low, after the manner of Beethoven's *Andante con Variazioni* in A flat major, and then he embroiders it magically with runs and flourishes into a gladsome *Allegro*, with all the subtle pauses and *cadenzas* of the true musician, until, finally, presto—presto—*presto*—it is done! Over high Hampstead the sun is up:

"Day!
Faster and more fast,
O'er night's brim, day boils at last;
Boils, pure gold, o'er the cloud-cup's brim."

For very breathlessness my friend in the ragged suit is dumb. He looks about him and below. Thin wisps of smoke begin to

curl " O'er the tall white chimney-pots." Over the way, one green window blind steals up—and then another, and another. From beneath one, the white arms of a woman move gracefully as she coils her hair. The world is stirring. Monday morning, a phantasm an hour or so ago, is now so keen a reality that even Pharaoh and his dull-orbed kind are on the move. My troubadour is a glum bachelor once more. He packs up his whistle, shakes his dusty coat, and is off to his club for breakfast. Even there, in a far corner of the tennis-lawn (walled in and wired in like a cage), he keeps himself to himself, moves to his own patch, and has his own solitary dish of dewy worm.

What will his future be? I may see him yet—if I live long enough—in melancholy travesty of his better days, a despondent old bachelor bird, piping sadly at the doors of his more fortunate kin up among the ridge-tiles, a starling's version, huskily haunting, of Tosti's " Good-Bye."

II.

SUNDAY AT HOME.

In this small village where I find sanctuary from present turmoil, and where the House of Lords, with its ginger-bread gilt, disturbs nobody, and pigs count more than politics, it is sweet to breathe the air of freedom. Not long ago we heard that the Germans were coming to conquer us in fleets of air-ships; but that did not trouble us, for we measured the powers of the invaders from the standard of the German bands who visit us occasionally and play grunty tunes through dented brass upon the village green. And we smiled. We

are a happy family; poor but honest. Our honesty keeps us poor, and our religion keeps us honest.

Ever since I can remember, the powers of darkness have fought against the powers of light in the material forces of three public-houses against three places of worship. Temptation is great, for the home-brewed at the Axe and Compasses is beyond compare—up to ten o'clock of a Saturday night. But when the Sabbath dawns, and the eight o'clock bell clangs its high-pitched note of warning from the church tower, and the startled jackdaws wheel and toss in the sunshine like black sparks, then sanctity reigns, and we put on our Sunday faces with our Sunday clothes, and week-day is shoved behind us. The parson, in his slippers, trots across from the vicarage, and himself rings the bell. What matters the smallness of the congregation? The spirit is there, though the village may be asleep.

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Until nearly eleven the street is empty; but within doors everybody is busy over the important matter of the toilet, and presently the village emerges resplendent, showing a glorious morning face to the sun. The sun may be bright, but somehow there is a solemn, sober dignity in it. The broad green water-meadows take the light of Day staidly. The song of the Brook which gives them their name is a Psalm of David—a quiet carol of green pastures and still waters. The old mill is silent and quiescent, with his stark arms pointing to Heaven. There is no whirl in them to-day, however the south-wester may boom. Worship calls; mill and man obey. The chapel is a square, colourless place, mustily warm, and lighted with dim and dusty windows, tombstone shaped. The man who built our chapel (and now sleeps under a Portland slab just beyond it) could never have smiled, I am sure.

The walls are drab, the ceiling is drab; the minister, dwarfed behind the drab pulpit with its oil lamps hanging like malefactors in chains at each side of the desk, is drab also. He is a small mis-shapen man, with thin legs bowed, and a long lugubrious upper lip, clean shaven, under a hawk nose. The rest of his face, jaundiced and sunken, is tufted with a scatter of grey whisker and beard, scanty—like wind-blown sedge on a sandhill. He has no fire in him. It was all burnt out years and years ago. He is just an ash.

* * * * *

His quenched eye takes in the congregation. He knows every one of them, too well. He opens the big Bible, and with cunning sleight-of-hand slips in the closely written sheets he has prepared. His theme is Eternal Life; there is a tinge of drabness in that, too. Our little minister does not show us rich promise of the hereafter. What can we expect for the small salary we pay him? The Eternity he gives us as the reward for repentance is a sad place of whispers and folded hands won at last by the fearful Christian through terrors triumphant; the alternative is a lukewarm Hell shorn of its most blasting terrors in deference to the wife of the head deacon, whose own hands worked the purple pulpit-cushion, and whose heart is weak. Through these colourless phrases we nod drowsily—drowsily—. Presently the harmonium bleats, and we sing, very, very slowly:

O, day of rest and gladness,
O, day of joy and light.

You will observe that we take our religion sadly; but for all that it is very real to us, and sometimes Heaven is quite near, and the aged among us, deaf to all outward clamour, may

hear the soft beat of wings, and quietly praise the Lord for all His mercies.

* * * * *

Then, there is Sunday afternoon in the best room, closed all the week, and its furniture shrouded. The shrouds are removed for the Sabbath ; red plush emerges almost riotously. The lady of the house sits enthroned, her Sunday cap with its jet ornaments making cold, steely music at every nod. Taste is displayed here in lavish gloom. Wax flowers in a glass dome strike a graveside note, clammily ***in memoriam.*** Over the mantelpiece is a masterpiece in crewel-work, depicting a blue nest full of red young birds with yellow mouths agape, as a green mother-bird perched upon an adjacent bough feeds them with a purple worm. Underneath in ultramarine and black, is worked the legend :

"WHAT IS HOME WITHOUT
A MOTHER ?"

What, indeed ? Family portraits, with complexions as convincing in their waxiness as the wax flowers, hang on the walls in company with fans and paper ornaments. One by one callers drop in—rather, they steal in. The ladies have scent on their handkerchiefs ; the hair of the gentlemen shines. Dolorous conversation is a prelude to handing round the large papier-maché tray piled with the mourning cards of deceased relatives and friends of the lady of the house. Aunt Emma is here, enshrined in a bordering of white-winged trumpeting angels ; here is Ebenezer, too good for this world, and eager for the next, with a little verse underneath the catalogue of his earthly qualities, beginning :

"Here I raise my Ebenezer."

Here, in embossed glory, shines Jeremiah, who died of a quinsy in his eighty-ninth year, Deeply Regretted ; also

relict of the above, Hannah (to wit) " and two small infants too young to appreciate their bereavement." Saintly memories conjured up by these gruesome squares of black and silver, fill up the time to tea.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, the remainder of the village is taking its rest (and gladness) in various ways. You can hear Izzy Jempson practising the bass of " There is a Happy Land " in his little back garden. His instrument is the euphonium, which, exercised by itself on the lower clef, possesses mournful merits particularly its own. The postman is up in his bedroom wrestling with his melodeon ; his experiments in dabbing for the right note are successful, sometimes. He is getting on with " Sun of my Soul," and he has been heard to express the hope—in moments of undoubted piety—that they won't be all harps in the hereafter. Then, not so far away, there is a lane consecrated to lovers—shy, silent, hand-in-hand, and happy. Where there is youth, Love lingers alway, with impatient feet—even in our hamlet.

Softly the night creeps up, and the little lamps of high Heaven twinkle to light the way for the angels flying down to guard us, for we are a long way from anywhere, and very lonely when our quiet corner of the world has rolled out of the watchful eye of the sun, and Night reigns. At the end of the long village street, the tombstone windows of our chapel glow with light. The bleat of the little, lamb-like harmonium calls us again to worship, and on our way we stumble in the grass among the graves of our ancestors. . . .

" Our life is a daily miracle," says the preacher, his sallow face more sombre than ever between the hanging lamps, " A daily miracle——" There is a quaver in his thin voice which suggests that he doubts it.

III.

TWINKS.

THE stuff that dreams are made of is grown in fairyland. The seeds are set always at full moon at random among the mushroom-rings, and nobody—not even the fairies themselves—may tell what shape they will take. They come up suddenly when the night is black and the stars are blotted out by the swift, weird draperies of dolorous clouds. Then, in the hush of sleep-time do strange things grow upon tall, thin stalks, and the fairies come out in myriad swarms, with their gauzy wings making small music in the heavy air, and shake the stalks, and shake them until a magic kind of thistledown, called Twink by the descendants of Titania and her merry crew, tumbles in glistening particles like sea-spray about their ears. Then, they beat mighty tattoos upon their dock-leaf drums to summon the Winds; and the Winds come, softly, from all sorts of places, with pursed lips and floating hair, to blow the silvery dream-thistledown about the world; just as children play at telling the time with dandelion clocks.

Each little twink of silver is a dream—a dream whirling off merrily somewhere—a dream so tiny that only the sharpest fairy eye can see it as it flits along to dive through a sentinel moonbeam or to clamber on to a careering gossamer-thread to get a free ride through the night. It is long after bed-time, and the world is asleep. But all the time the Twinks are careering about, helter-skelter—here, there, and everywhere, looking for victims.

* * * * *

Speedy, pranky little apostles of contrariness, with the vagaries of Puck as their sole Testament, they juggle heartlessly with snoozing humanity. One of them flies off with

a whirr to the palace of gold and silver, with its porphyry pillars, and its glitter all dimmed by brooding Night. Up the wide staircase it floats, and into the bedchamber of the sleeping Queen. She is fair and beautiful; all that a Queen should be; and she smiles in her sleep—until the Dream comes, and a strange world is built amid the piled splendours of gold and silver and porphyry, and the Queen is no more than a beggar-maid wandering through it, heavy of foot and sore at heart. All is dim and dull—dull and dim. No light shines to herald her as Queen, no carolling multitude bends the knee as she passes through dingy streets and drab crowds, lost—utterly lost.

In an hour at the utmost she is conscious that her presence is required at a great function at the Palace, sparkling with diamonds and shining with cloth of gold. Oh, to be in time—in time! She gathers up her ragged skirts, and runs, remembering suddenly her rank, and wondering what the world would say. The evening papers would come out in millions and millions and millions with "bills" and headlines:

MYSTERIOUS
DISAPPEARANCE
OF A QUEEN!

Oh—dreadful—dreadful! Then suddenly the Dream-Twink carries her to the summit of a great monument, points out the Palace shining far below—miles and miles and miles; and says, "Jump . . . your Majesty will yet be in time!"

And as her Majesty jumps the Twink leaves her, with a little cackle of sardonic enjoyment; and she opens her affrighted eyes to the familiar splendours of her own dear apartment. . . .

* * * * *

Meanwhile, other Twinks are hard at work playing the devil in the receptive brains of sleepers. The lover, living in daydreams of his sweet mistress, kisses her good-night at her door, and goes home to bed. "I shall dream of you, darling," says he over the parting sigh. But a mischievous Twink overhears him and follows him home. "*Will* you?" says he; and presently the lover, whose last thoughts are the eyes of Her, the hair of Her, the lips of Her, the sylph-like form of Her—presently the lover sleeps, with her dear name upon his lips. He dreams that he is a fly-paper, catching blue-bottles. He hears the hum of them—a vast, ceaseless hum, noisy as the transforming-station at South Kensington, and he catches thousands on the tip of his nose—flip . . . buzz; flop . . . buzz; until the Twink is breathless with laughter, and leaves him to his fate.

Then, the Poet, with his shaggy mane limp with the sweat of his pulsing hexameters to Proserpine, seeks his downy couch, eager to dream melodies more melodious than ever Milton dreamed. The Twink nestles near his noble brow, on the self-same pillow; and the Poet dreams a long, harrowing dream, whose theme is Sausages, with a never-ending refrain of Mashed. Next door sleeps the Theologian, and a rascally Twink whisks him off straightway to the crunching cinder-track of Tophet's sulphurous highway; and he dreams he is dancing "Sir Roger" with fork-tailed, base-tongued imps around a deacon-fed fire smelling of roast pork and most hot and uncomfortable to the eyes. . . . .

No sooner has he peeled off his socks than the Politician—bursting in the day-time with the arrogance of the eternal Ego—dreams that he is a washerwoman, all steam and soap-suds, bald on the top, and with bonnet awry and scores of ravenous children clamouring at his skirts. He wakes himself up with his own indignant snores. The Archbishop of

Canterbury, goaded on by an irreligious Twink of Nonconforming tendencies, passes a happy and hilarious night as the deft-fingered proprietor of a winkle-stall; and the Magnate of Throgmorton Street and Park Lane spends his happiest hours as an energetic and omnivorous street-orderly boy.

* * * * *

Under the wizard spell of the topsy-turvy Twink, only the nobodies dream they are somebodies. The Cheesemonger finds himself—not at all to his surprise—seated at a roller-top desk inlaid with ivory and precious stones, with a soft quill pen in his fat fingers, and scented ink at his elbow, turning out, act by act, a play in comparison with which "Hamlet" is a mere Adelphi "Devil," and interlarded with sonnets finer far and more melodious than our sweetest singers ever sang. Helicon dwindles to a mere molehill beside the new Mount of Poesy raised in one night by an industrious Twink in a Peckham purlieu, with the inspiring parasite of Gorgonzola egging him on.

And so the Twinks run on, up and down the whole gamut of the shut-eyed world, while Night haunts her in its spectral garb. It is only when the dream-dust settles lightly among the curls of sleeping childhood that my random pen stops short. For their dreams are too wonderful, too sweet, too beautiful to write about.

Special Twinks sent down through the signing stars straight from Heaven are the children's playmates among the daisies and the daffodils of dreamland. They take them by the hand and lead them into the most glorious adventures along the dew-spangled valleys of Innocence. It would need magic ink made of the distilled plumule of golden butterfly wings to describe these breathless excursions into Wonderland. And even then, a Starland Twink would have to do the writing.

IV.

ALL MOONSHINE.

EVERY day now, the morning breaks earlier; and the white mists drifting high in the almost windless infinite, scatter and vanish before the urgent eye of the sun riding with majesty into his kingdom. The nights—the country nights—are beautiful. The stars do not come out in single points of distant light, as in summer, when the long, breathless pause between sundown and moonrise is marked by the tardigrade wanderings of the Lamplighter touching a planet here and there with his wand. The darkness comes more rapidly after the sun is tucked up and snug asleep; at a touch the whole boundless heavens are ablaze with starshine, and the gorgeous track of the Via Lactae tinkles with the fairy music of the faraway.

Such nights tune the heart to noble things—make a giant of a man, pumping courage into him as he swings over the hill, urging him to great deeds of head or hand; clear, clean thoughts, and a beautiful reverence for the Divine Artificer whose lavish hand has spread all these wonders before him, around him, and overhead. So, he may look up and sing in the sublime verse of "The Celestial Surgeon":

> If I have faltered more or less
> In my great task of happiness;
> If I have moved along my race
> And shown no glorious morning face;
> If beam from happy human eyes
> Have moved me not; if morning skies,
> Books and my food, and summer rain
> Knocked on my sullen heart in vain—
> Lord, Thy most pointed pleasure take,
> And stab my spirit broad awake!

Then, moonrise, and the gradual lifting of Cimmeria's round, red lantern into the sky. The stars blink and blink and gradually fade at her oncoming—a pantomime moon at first, incongruously big and heavy and bloated—an old lady with a face flushed by wine—out of place, surely, in this clean home of virgin stars!

* * * * *

By the little farmhouse on the shoulder of the hill, marked only by a blur of red light in a bedroom window, a dog barks uneasily, and out of the piled blackness of the rookery near at hand, a brown wood-owl complains with his sad "*hoo-hooo*," like the sob of a soul in pain.

Later, you hear him again, when the moon is higher and smaller in heaven, with her sullenness washed clean away, and her face a glorious silver; and you remember that the brown owl's note is a sure precursor of Spring. You remember, and are glad.

And so, to bed with the blind up and the window down—to bed and to dream in the high, clear moonlight. Comfortable dreams, wherein the dog and the brown wood-owls and the whispered confidences of the tall trees and the tinkle-music of the lustrous stars make soft, companionable chorus. The owls talk, nodding their wise heads mandarin-like as they tell you stories of tree-top and thicket, and invite you to a regal supper of cold field-mouse and pickles, with acorn cups of distilled dew to wash it down. And you're not a bit surprised—even when Venus comes down from skyland as guest of the evening, having travelled all the way from Empyrean-avenue in Charles's Wain, with Sirius in the shafts, and her resplendent self on the box seat.

It is a matter of course, too, when the Lamplighter himself appears, a long, lean, grim old man, with puckered lips and

a limp; and striding out of the hazy East, lopes across the sky, and turns off a star at every step until only the Moon is left. The gay old lady's face wrinkles at his approach; in the sudden, unaccountable way dreams have, she is now only a lamp hanging from a hook in the domed ceiling of heaven. Solemnly, the Lamplighter lifts her off, and blows her out—*pouff!* Darkness! The brown wood-owl's supper party is broken up. . . .

* * * * *

"If you're going my way I'll give you a lift," says Venus; and pursing the divine bow of her mouth she whistles for Sirius.

Up he trots—a gay dog, if ever there was one, with the Wain lumbering at his tail, and the name of the wagoner just discernable, picked out in diamond dust stars under the tilt:

CHARLES,
Carrier,
Canis Major.

Was there ever such a drive, in such company, with the gallant Sirius straining at the collar, and the Lady of the Golden Girdle steering him cunningly round the tricksy corners of the welkin, and the clamorous supper company of the brown wood-owls, with hilarious hoot and rapid, noiseless wing seeing you part of the way home? Never, never! Gee-up, good Sirius! Break o' day is at hand, and there never was a dog star yet brave enough to wag tail in the eye of the sun!

Dreams, after all—mere dreams born of the poetry of a magical night, a night of pure moonshine when the world is sleeping softly. In the vivid mist of the vision you awake to sunrise and a blue sky filmed with orange-tinted cloud, whose changing glow carries its warm message to the heart and tells the sweet story that once again Spring is on the way,

light of step, with music on her lips and laughter in her eyes. And that is why these long white nights beyond the wilderness of chimney-pots and soot-frosted telegraph wires, far away from the ceaseless racket of hemmed humanity, strike the chord that is in all of us. It is full, deep, and sounding. In every vibration, the psalm of Life acclaims once more the small beginnings of things great and small. At my window the coming of the dawn is announced merrily in the prattle of the sparrows and the skirl of the liquid-throated starlings, whose noisy colony will presently break up into love-making couples. Upside-down, on the cherry-tree across the lawn, the blue titmouse has begun his little chirpy song; in the dreamland elms the rooks are making tremendous clamour; whilst the brown owls sleep, uneasily, in the sunshine, and even the hens have thrown off their winter lassitude, laying vigorously at eighteenpence the score! So, list, ye townsmen!

* * * * *

All the meadows are lively with young lambs—long-tailed, spindle-shanked, and near bursting with happy bleatfulness as they play hide-and-seek in the lush grass with frequent intervals for refreshment under the woolly lee of their mammies. I love lambs. . . .

* * * * *

Into this rhapsody Angelica breaks, with high health on her cheeks, and dew pearls on her dainty slippers. She looks over my shoulder, and her eyes sparkle mischievously as she reads.

"If I were you," she says, "I would strike out the 's' in that last word, 'lambs.'"

I ask, in innocence, why?

"Because," says she, "I have been out in the garden, gathering mint!"

V.

THE GENTLEMAN IN THE PARLOUR.

"It is great to shake off the trammels of the world and of public opinion—to lose our importunate, tormenting, everlasting personal identity in the elements of Nature, and become the creature of the moment, clear of all ties—to hold to the universe only by a dish of sweetbreads, and to owe nothing but the score of the evening—and no longer seeking for applause and meeting with contempt, to be known by no other title than *the Gentleman in the parlour!*"

Thus writes William Hazlitt in one of his most comfortable moods; and I echo his philosophy in my wanderings across the face of this entertaining country. Romance, adventure, entertainment, surprise, excitement—all dwell together happily, *en famille*, in a country inn. If I am lucky in my choice I may find somewhere along the dim corridors of upstairs the trail of a Ghost in the pale moonlight; a bedroom wherein the Virgin Queen slept; a Cavalier bullet-hole in a panel; a deep oaken chest creaking with the mystery of the Mistletoe Bough; the Murderer's Room; the Suicide's Chamber—anything!

* * * * *

So you know the kind of inn I mean. Preferably, there must be a cobbled courtyard, with a balcony of black oak, behind which the bright bedroom windows sparkle in the morning sun. There may be no coach to rattle in under the low archway as the outside passengers duck to save their crowns: you must imagine all that. And there must be no modern gimcrackery in the place. The landlord must be in keeping with his house—voice, bass and hearty, with a touch of purple in his face—neck-cloth neatly folded under a chin

or two, and pinned in its place with a gold fox's mask, a snaffle-bit or a horn—legs slightly bowed, thin in comparison with the rest of him, and finished off smartly with drab leggings of cloth tightly buttoned—gold curb amplifying a well-lined paunch—a touch of sandy whisker curling at his ears—and a clear eye, weatherwise and quick to observe. With such a host to give you welcome, you may be sure of your inn, and certain of the best of good things.

The Gentleman in the parlour may take his ease and begin his adventures with a complaisant spirit. You are Number One on the First Floor, and Jessie, with her tight little figure tucked into a neat print gown, shows you the way into a big airy room with a mighty four-poster riding at anchor in it. It is just such a room in which Mr. Pickwick (most modest and delicate-minded of mortals) found himself, to his dismay, joint occupant with the middle-aged lady in yellow curl-papers. And there—O, joy !—is the deep oaken chest, with its arabesque panels gorgeously eloquent of Mystery ; and by the head of the bed hangs an old, old bell-rope with a tassel of faded crimson.

You have noted on the way up, row upon row of bells ; there is no electric fandangle here—each bell has its own musical tinkle, and Jessie tells you, with a bright smile, that she knows every ring by heart, and has no need to look up to see which bell is trembling on its curled spring when the Gentleman in the parlour tugs at the tassel for his morning tea and his shaving water.

* * * * *

You learn, too, that this is His Grace's room—His Grace's four-poster when he comes late to town or is cast away hereabouts after a long day with the Fitzwilliam pack. A " most pleasant-spoken gentleman "—fond of his glass of port, with

an epicure taste for horseflesh, and a keen eye for a pretty woman. You imagine him as a sort of ducal Jorrocks; it is a pleasure to find the Duke in harmony with these eminently comfortable surroundings, hob-a-nob with the curly-whiskered host, and familiar with the soft lavender scents of the harbour of the great four-poster in Number One.

It is quite delightful—but hardly surprising—to meet the spit of Mr. Samuel Weller in the courtyard shining up the harness, straw in mouth, and hissing at it as any real ostler always does whatever he be cleaning—horse, harness, or himself. A respectful "mornin', sir!" a touch of the forehead, and confidences are at once established between the Gentleman in the parlour and Samuel.

For ten minutes you are enwrapt in the pervading pungency of harness-paste, and close in talk of an easy-going world, where nothing really matters so long as the going is soft and the scent is high, with Heaven asmile and vixen plentiful. Teuton hosts may invade our placid shores or sail whizzing into the overhead fog of London town, death duties and agricultural depression may grip the Duke by the throat till he gasps for breath; but what matter these petty possibilities? To-morrow?—tut! It's to-day that matters. The sun is up; the meet's a mile away . . . *is the bone out of the ground?*"

Drake on Plymouth Hoe calculating the bias with a crafty eye; Tom the huntsman with his toe in the stirrup and his nose sniffing the morning air—to-day, as yesterday, the quiet, homely picture of tranquil England thus unfolds itself.

Indeed and indeed it's a bonny, brave country, this England of ours. The Gentleman in the parlour, fresh from town, looks in vain for anxious faces; that palsied chattering of the teeth which he left behind him in Fleet Street is not here, where the broad acres roll, and the melody of Home rings an unfaltering tune. We are still alive, still sturdy—still unafraid!

The morning wears on, and the little world of this small town moves briskly about its business. One by one the folk drop into the bar-parlour for their Eleven-o'clock. Upon them, from the walls, oleographs mellowed by the changing years smile down—Lord Salisbury, with a heavy black beard and settled lineaments; the Marquess of Hartington, pendulous-lipped and lazy; Randolph Churchill, in the youth of his dandy moustachios and bright, bird-like eyes; and Mr. Gladstone, whose fierce eloquence still shines through the cracking glaze.

Bread and cheese and brown ale; broad-vowelled talk of cattle and crops, hill and stream, form the morning entertainment; and then the doctor to his patients, the auctioneer to his pens, the stationmaster to his office, the exciseman to his calls—and the Gentleman in the parlour to whatever business may have brought him down to this pleasant place. You may be sure it is soon over; the afternoon passes in a drowse, and slips imperceptibly to evening, with its twinkling lights and easy enjoyments.

And what can be more pleasant after such a day than a well-ordered dinner in the parlour, with a fire blazing cheerfully on the hearth, a crisp chicken under the cover, with Mr. Hazlitt's dish of sweetbreads to follow, and Maggie's slim fingers moving deftly among the bright silver and the shining glass?

The cloth is cleared; there is a tap on the door . . .

"Will the Gentleman in the parlour join the landlord and the gentlemen in the smoking-room?"

* * * * *

Most decidedly, he will. And there they all are again—doctor, auctioneer, stationmaster, and the rest, each with his long clay and steaming glass of toddy, each with the tale of

his day's adventure quaintly told and quietly chuckled over.

And, finally, up the broad and silent stairs to the gallant old four-poster, ghostly but comfortable in the calm candle-light. The Gentleman in the parlour is soon snug and sound asleep in the eerie silences of the old inn ; even should Plantaganet Duke, riding late through the miry highways, draw exhausted rein at the inn archway he must needs find another bed to-night. The Gentleman in the parlour must not be disturbed.

VI.

THE FIRST.

It is a lively morning. A booming South-Wester has dusted the sky clear of all cloud ; and last night's starshine has melted into the unfathomable uppermost, to clear the way for bonny daylight. " Hoo-whoop ! " sings the wind ; and the old weathercock, tip-toe on the church spire, sticks his nose into it bravely, to keep his tail warm and his brazen feathers straight. On Mark's Hill the rickety windmill, tickled by the finger of rollicking, ramping, raging Youth, has forgotten the respectable hoariness of his lichen-splashed top hamper, and has gone mad with the rest of the world. He's making our bread furiously—loaves and loaves and loaves of it ! See his waving arms chasing one another round like tee-to-tum puppies twiddling after their own tails ! Look at his one eye, high up there in the roof, fixed and unwinking, and abulge with the energy of his strenuous twirlings ! I'll warrant that the Miller is having the devil of a time at the feeding of him. Unceasingly he creaks for morre—morre—morre !

On the hilltop, under these whirring, threatening arms—a most hazardous spot—are the miller's hens pirating among the golden overflow. 'Tis quaint to see them tacking against the bluster, and the lady hens clucking in angry expostulation at their disarray when a shockingly familiar blast blows their petticoats over their heads. For shame, rude Boreas! Mme. Miller comes out from the whitewashed cottage. A practised hand at the business, she leans up, familiarly, against the wind at a wide angle with her hands down, clipping her skirts for the safer harbourage of her white stockings. She looks up in the Bedlamite eye of the old mill and shouts, "George! Breakfast!" But her voice is torn away into the Infinite—chaff in a hurricane. George, deaf to all but the giant mutterings of his mill, heeds not.

* * * * *

Down the hill the madness of the morning is but little less restrained. Stacks and stacks of newly-carried wheat are dotted here and there—golden Nereides of the harvest, with tempest-tousled hair. Spread-eagled humans lie on them, as though they had been spitted there. They are the thatchers at work—grim old men with faces like oak-bark, and hands knotted and gnarled out of all shape by their business. But this pranky South-Wester catches them with its bellowing "hoo-whoop," until they have to hang on like mariners reefing in a Biscay gale. The bullocks in the rough water-meadows cock their tails and run, sillily, anywhere, to end up, as likely as not, by shoving their heads into the hedge, and snorting a murrain on all this meddlesome bluster. Everything is cock-a-hoop—drunk in the gusty delights of this young, tip-top day, with its cascading streams of sunshine, flecked with momentary shadows, like small sorrows scampering away to hide. And the very Sun is being bowled along

by the careless breeze, until, high up in the blue vault, he pauses and swings like a golden kite held by an invisible string.

On such a day Frolic was born. Frolic, with her streaming, gipsy hair, mischief in her eye, and laughter on her rich, ripe lips. On such a day, Curmudgeon crawled out of his house, crusty-faced and cantankerous, looked round and saw the merry windmills hurtling; looked down and saw the ripples on the water, the flickering shadows alternating with silver, all ashine; looked up and saw the tall elms swaying to the melodious pipe of Nature; cricked his neck (for he was a hump-backed old moper), and looked higher still, when he saw Heaven so smiling, that he was bound to smile too. He became, suddenly, a Man, with a Soul. . . .

* * * * *

Though the birds are not singing—it's a breathless business when the wind blows; and hanging on to a swaying bough is quite enough to do—they are enjoying it just as much as the rest of us. The starlings are flocked in gay battalions of twenties and thirties and forties; you'd think them East-end trippers at Margate for the pother they're making. They are dressed in their best black; not a sober black, by any means, but all sheeny with metallic greens and blues. All together, they run and jump, gravely, gorgeously ridiculous, shrilling bird-phrases at the top of their thin voices, and playing the fool in every possible way. Give them a barrel-organ, and I'll swear they'd dance to it! But something happens, and, whirr! away they go, tossed and tumbled in the wind, but all together—to alight in a black crowd far away like swarming bees, where the revelry is continued with never-ending variations of solemn absurdity. Only the swifts seem to enjoy this breathless turmoil. Secure on their long,

thin pinions, they whirl high in the air, teaching their young the tricks of the trade and that wonderful balancing business which we, with our clumsy machinery of canvas and steel and what not, are learning to emulate. Truly, the poetry of motion is theirs. As the hymn says, "Heaven is their home."

Under the sun hangs the "wind-hover"—wonderful name for such a wonder of Nature. I scorn to call her by her proper name. Your naturalist may have the "kestrel hawk" for a label for his museum; give me the wind-hover. Look at her as she hangs there, motionless but for an occasional tip o' the wing as the merry tempest swirls round her, over her, and under her. She, too, is out for the sheer joy of riding at anchor on the limitless ocean of Empyrean. She has no song to sing, but the good Mother has given her magic sails to ride as she will, up in the vast illimitable Blue. She is a matchless mystery, dozing the long noons through with lazy wings, and rocking softly in a cradle of—nothing, with the sob of the wind for her cradle-song.

* * * * *

Ah! what a day to be alive in—alive, a day on which good thoughts come of themselves without any bidding; when only sweet, beautiful things are born,

> as the swift hours yoke
> Their horses to the rising sun!

Gloom flies. The Poet weaves his rainbows of delicate fancies with a spangled loom to his hand; the Philosopher, with calm, untroubled brow and quiet fingers, traps the elusive phrase; the Caledonian, stern and wild, no longer stumbles over the point; he sees—he sees! And I, chancing to gaze across my worthy inkpot in the turmoil of what to say next, and in what flowery garments to dress the wayward child of my

fancy, am confronted by the Calendar, whose faithful record announces in plain figures :

SEPTEMBER 1.

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Hey ! Give me my gun, speedily, and a pocketful of the smokeless No. 12's. It's a bonny morning for murder ! Hey ! Down with the pen, let slip the dogs of Sport !

You and I, brother, will go out and slay something !

VII.

ROOKERY.

A SUDDEN whirl of snow, a flash of sunshine, a wild gust of wind, scampering clouds tearing across the blue—turmoil everywhere ! The old brass cock on the top of the church spire is having the very devil of a time. He's in a state of brain-storm. He has lost his head in the twiddles and the twirls of the morning. For the life of him he doesn't know where he is in this elemental Rehearsal of the Arcadian pantomime. " Give me breathing-time ! " he implores, with his comb awry and his tail feathers in tatters.

" Whoosch ! " retorts that person known to poets and juvenile journalists as Boreas—always rude ; and round goes poor cocky on the swaying spire-tip ! Indeed, 'tis a sad time for weathercocks, old and young, just now.

The wind is in the trees, making music like a full tide frothing and hissing over fine shingle. The tall elms of the Rookery toss their black manes, and shed splinters and sproutlings below, almost sapless just now. Act I. of the " Forty Thieves " is in very active rehearsal here. Babel—babel—babel—from the very moment that dawn peeps

(grey, with a tinge of pink) over the eastern edge of our little world of grain and grazing-land, to night-cap and toddy-time of rude Boreas's co-conspirator, Old Sol! The period of love-making and walking-out among the Rooks (who form the complete *dramatis personæ* of the ferocious Forty) is over long since. It is now a serious case of housekeeping and making both ends meet on an income as slender as the creaking twigs known now as Home on the tip-top floor of Elm Tree Mansions.

Do you know, dear reader, what a ridiculously serious business courting is among the Henrys and the Harriets of Rookland? I doubt it. Well, as soon as the daffodils begin to show the tips of their green noses through the snow, and the little baby lambs are bleating in the bleak, and burying the tips of *their* black noses amid the woolly undergrowth of mammy, the heart of Henry turns (by no means lightly) to thoughts of Love. Daybreak sees the whole colony of our rookery at mattins—riotously musical. Suddenly, off they go in a black cloud, headed by the bald-faced, bare-beaked Methuselah of the Mansions, to a distant parade ground of ploughed land, miles and miles away. Here, should the earth be soft—as it usually is at this time of the year—the morning worm is taking his innocent dew-bath over the clods. . . . The breakfast gong clangs. . . . Adieu, fair Lob. Thy number is up!

This diet of worms is an incentive to love. There follows the Courting Hour, with Methuselah playing gooseberry on the quick-set hedge bordering the parade-ground. Oh—oh—oh! It is absurd. Doubtless you are aware (if you know London) of that most extraordinary scene on Sunday nights up and down Fleet Street and the Strand, where young men and maidens parade and preen, preen and parade, in their very best clothes—girls together, with linked arms; boys

together, aromatic with pomade and very cheap tobacco—all silent and all jammed. Two Strephons will follow two Chloes (six paces to the rear) for two hours. Like calls to like through variegated waistcoat and purple plush, while feathers toss in the evening air. But not a word—not a whisper! This weird perambulation is known as the Monkeys' Parade.

The same thing happens with my friends the rooks. They parade in pompous march up and down the plough. Their solemnity is supreme! Ladies in couples—gentlemen in couples—walking with the rocking dignity of the drunken sailor ashore. But, unlike the Sunday evening humans, they do get forrarder as digestion proceeds, and the sun comes out to smile on them. After some sly stock-taking, there is a gradual pairing-off. Sentimental Tommy produces a tit-bit from a worm-hole, and with a soft little k-r-r-r-ar (signifying emotion with a mouth full) offers it to Grizel. Similar love-tokens can be observed all over the field, and at each acceptance Methuselah flaps his glossy coat-tails, and up go the banns! It's a case of "woo'd and married an' a'" in next to no-time. No long engagements, no regrets, no philandering—but an occasional battle-royal when two champions contend for the hand and heart of the same damsel. The fight is sharp and short. A ring is formed, and the two go at it hammer-and-tongs. Woe betide the vanquished; for once he is down the ring closes in and settles his hash once and for all. Blood and feathers—feathers and blood! He is on his back with his toes heavenwards and a gruesome, white film over his beady eye. And the lady for whom he has fought so valiantly is allowed to administer the short-arm jab which is so often described in the minutes of the National Sporting Club as the *coup de grace*, or the knock-out.

"Way for the lady, please!" In she waddles, with her head on one side—the very essence of coyness. But that coyness is shockingly simulated. The recumbent rook gurgles for mercy; but the lady poises her shapely form on her toes, steels those dreadful neck-muscles, and with a snarl of contempt plunges in the Last Peck, and the lugubrious lover is gathered to his fathers.

Then—to business, birds—to business! Back again home, in the surging surf of the tree-tops! Building, building, building from morn to night. Old homes re-furnished and shored up. New wall-papers, new bedclothes for mother, new doorways; some accidents, some casualties, an occasional strike of the amalgamated society of bricklayers and plasterers; but in the end all's right with the denizens of Elm Tree Mansions; and there's not a jerry-built domicile from end to end of the street.

* * * * *

And now to-day I see signs that the first egg is laid—a mottled-grey mystery with the magic of Life slowly but surely materialising inside it. Mother Rook is sitting all day and all night. Father goes a-foraging all the way to the old courting-ground (where the skeleton of the luckless lover lies bleaching under the changing sky), and returns with the very best dainties from the Buzzards and Benoists of Birdland. He squats on the edge of the Mansions and feeds his dear with beautiful solicitude, while she sits there over the precious bundle of mystery which will be a rampageous Rook some day, flaps her wings like a baby bird, and croodles her thanks.

The same business is going on in every tree-top in the rookery; and I noted this morning that the happy fathers were making a terrible caw over a sweepstake they are getting up as to which lady will be the first proud mother to proclaim

a new (and vastly voracious) addition to Arcadia. It is a big gamble, like the Peckham election—which, I observe from this distant corner of sunshine and shower, you in London are all in a flutter about.

"But you never know your luck!" says Methuselah of the bald face, as he drops his sixpence into the pool, and waits, with the patience of age, the Advent.

VIII.

THE DUSTMAN.

We give you all due warnin'!
When the decks are cleared,
And Old Tug we've cheered,
We shan't be round,
We SHAN'T be round,
We shan't be round in the mornin'!

Chorus to the Dustman's Action Song.

He sailed gladly into the carriage, heedless of the fact that it was a first-class compartment labelled "Reserved"; and behind him came two more bright specimens of the lower deck, rubbing the sleep out of their dim eyes. The early morning fog in which Waterloo Station was saturated steamed in as the door swung. We coughed in expostulation, but he turned a beaming, cherubic face upon us, drew himself up to his full six-foot-three, and saluted gravely.

"Pardon the intrusion of a Dirty Dustman," said he, in the tone of a lord, "to say nothing of the two other branches of the Service—a buntin' wagger and an able seaman, all bound to join the battleship 'Nonsuch,' of the Channel Fleet!"

" There's no need to salute us," said I.

" All the reason in the world," was the reply. " For don't you keep us? Ain't we your most humble and obejient servants? And don't we love you more'n anything in the wide—wide—world? " His voice sank to an ecstatic whisper, and his great, grimy hand described a circle in the air. " When you put your head on your pillow in the dewy evenin', after you've said your prayers, don't you sleep all the sounder because you know that the Channel Fleet is rockin' you to bye-bye? Don't you love us? And us the dirtiest lot of ships in the wide—wide—world? And we *shan't* be round in the mornin'! "

He pointed to the golden propeller blazed on the right sleeve of his tunic, indicating his rank as stoker. " I'm a dirty, miserable, blighted dustman," he said, " and I work in the dirty, miserable, blighted dusthole with a lot more dirty, miserable dustmen—all blighters to a man.

* * * * *

" We turned out the other day to cheer Emperor Bill—in the fog. Did *we* paint ship and look pretty? My word! His Imperial Kaisership cocked an eye at us when the fog lifted; and what did he see? A lot of scrap-iron waggin' linger-longer-Lucy propellers in a puddle o' brackish water between the Nab and Spit Fort. ' Is *that* the Channel Fleet? ' said he, as the old ' Nonsuch ' swung by like a dyin' duck in a thunderstorm. ' Aye, aye, your Imperial Majesty,' says the pilot, with his hand at the salute. ' And who,' says he, ' are them swarthy-countenanced gentlemen on the lower deck a-whisperin' at me? ' Maybe, our cheers sounded a bit whispery, for the atmosphere was like Molly Macguire's back kitchen on a washin' day. ' Oh,' says the pilot, ' them gentlemen are only the dirty dustmen—the stokers, your

Imperial Majesty. The sternerous duties of the Channel Fleet accounts for the fact that they haven't had time to wash their faces this mornin'.' 'Hum!' says the Kaiser, and then the 'Hohenzollern' sort o' melts away in the fog, and passes a lot more rusty-gutted, propeller-wagglin' old soft-water tanks, with a lot more dirty dustmen a-whisperin' 'Hock!' and wishin' it were beer!

"To all appearances there wasn't an Admiral in the whole of the hulk-shop who could steam fast enough to keep himself warm! Eh? Not in the wide—wide world?" (*pianissimo*).

"Later on, we climbed out of the dust-hole. 'Paint ship and look pretty for shore,' says the corporal. So we combed the clinkers out of our curly locks, took a wipe out of the Admiral's rouge-pot, and went on the giddy bust. Perhaps I had partaken of that which, when imbibed moderately, cheers the soul and broadens the intellect, but which, when drained to the dregs, debases the mind and disgraces the character. . . . But, after lyin' hours and hours in bed and condensin' the best fresh air in the wide, wide world, I somehow tumbled across a German sailor—One of—The—Best."

* * * * *

"Dip-lo-matic exchanges of confidences took place. He was surprised to learn that Percy Scott had been blowed off of a twelve-inch barbette gun in Sandown Bay for insubordination—privately. Of course, and with nothing—not a word—in the newspapers about it. Nor had he heard that the 'Nonsuch' had mutinied at sea because of the cruelties of our new 'old man,' whom we—the Dirty Dustmen—had locked up in the pantry with nothing but raspberry jam (which he detested) to eat; and that we had drawn fires—*at* sea, mind you—because two of our dustmen had been transferred to the Admiralty Yacht the 'Enchantress' to wait at

table on the ladies there! He gasped and said, 'Donner-splutter!'—or something to that effect; and his eyes bulged! I've never seen such a bulge in the wide—wide—world!

"I told him, too, how when we got lost on the North Sea, which was most frequent (here he smiled), we had to live on seagulls we shot over the Dogger Bank herrin' nets; and then I gave him a catalogue of the desp'rit sins of omission of Admiral Wilson—'Tug' Wilson. You know Tug?—One of —The—Best; and I'd go to the furthest and hottest corner of Hull and Halifax with him. I gave Mr. German a few little facts about 'Tug's' steam tattics (somehow forgettin' the Hull and Halifax part). I told him that when Tug took us on a cruise he never landed us at the show ports, but took us to far away corners of this wicked, wicked world, where, if we wanted to go ashore there wasn't a boozer within a twenty mile walk, and that always closed when we got to it. Cruel, I called it.

* * * * *

"Then we parted—kissing one another like Royal and Imperial brethren in arms—so to speak. 'If ever we fight, says I to him, 'it will be in the North Sea, brother Sossidge. Do you know what a unit of indicated horse-power is? No? And you in the engine-room? Well, every blighted dustman in the dusthole of the old 'Nonsuch' does, when we're steamin' with lights out and decks clear waitin' for the blessed sunrise, an' singin' all quiet-like down in the dusthole:

'We shan't be round in the mornin'!'

The eternerous duties of the Channel Fleet! Steam tattics! What do *we* know of steam tattics?" murmured the cherubic Dustman as the train drew up at Southampton West. The young signalman had fallen asleep, dreaming perhaps, of the North Sea, which to him and all the crew of H.M.S. "Nonsuch"

is as clear as a First Standard spelling-book—" and every wave labelled, cully ! "

" Wake up, my old buntin' wagger ! " cried the Dustman in a great voice. " There's time for a tiddly here ! "

* * * * *

The carriage door opened, and they shot like three big blue projectiles into the swirling fog—and that was the last I shall ever see of the Dirty Dustman. But if needs be and the bugle rings out some fine evening over the rocking waters of any of the Seven Seas, we shall all be secure in the knowledge that he and his brother blighters will all be round in the morning—sure enough !

IX.

THE LADY-HORSE.

SHE could do nearly everything but talk. She could even do that—to me. We understood one another, Kate and I. Sometimes it was the mute language such as lovers talk in—hearts in tune to the music of a pearly morning with a sparkle of frosty sun tremendously high up in the blue, with the sky drawn up to the very floor of Heaven and a great glorious space for young Winter to whirl in, and the winds to blow and the birds to tumble and toss recklessly like dancing atoms in a sun ray.

Sometimes it was a real live joke which would strike us both together—me in the saddle riding easily with a loose rein, and Katie pattering merrily over the soft turf, with her little feet twinkling and her one white stocking looking for all the world as though it had slipped down and was

crying aloud for a garter. All the rest of her was pure chestnut, except for a small splash of white on her broad forehead.

So she made a picture of a tomboy sort of little lady-horse when the freaky whim struck her, and I was in the riotous mood, and we both saw the run of the thing and the jest of life, and played the fool accordingly. She would lay back one ear, toss her hoyden head and burst into a small squeal of laughter. Then she would kick sideways (still on the scamper) as if to throw me; but I, her lord and master, knew a trick worth two of that, and she knew I knew; so I never fell off and we never fell out.

* * * * *

When she came to me first (how the years have piled since then!) she was something of a young shrew—a spitfire Katherina; and that's why I christened her Kate. At her advent I walked on air; the world and all upon it was mine; this was my first horse. Alexander was never so proud of Bucephalos as I of bonny Kate. I twisted a new curb, careful that it should not kink, under her soft chin; the cold glare of scorn in her melting brown eye warned me not. . . . We were off—away—away! The wind sang as we tore through it; wind against wind for pace. I gave her the curb to steady her; I heard her snort, I felt her cringe at the cruel pain . . . and the next minute I was on my back, swept from the saddle by the protruding bough of an oak under which my angry shrew had carried me, revengefully!

Then she trotted back and stood over me, shaking her head. I looked up from my undignified sprawl, and our eyes met. Hers were reproachful. I'll swear I saw tears in them. I took off the curb and tossed it high and far into the oak, where it stayed. Then I kissed my Kate on her soft brown muzzle and gave her a lump of sugar. She took

it tenderly with her lips—and we understood one another! A kiss and a sugar plum will e'en make a pouting sweetheart smile—to say nothing of a little lady-horse, with a saucy eye and a half-way-down white stocking!

So my Kate and I plighted our troth. This was our first quarrel and our last. And O! the times we had together, my Kate and I, with the fresh air and the happy sunshine and the rolling clouds, and the commons and the roadsides, all squishy after the morning rain, for company; Nature's piping glee-singers for our orchestra, and the unspoilt world of England's moorland and pasture to gipsy over to the content of heart and hoof.

When the hunting days dawned, and it was holiday-time for me, and the pink coats came riding jiggety-jig over the hill to the meet at Catworth Fox, bless me—how our young hearts thumped! I always suspected that Kate somehow got hold of the *Hunts County News* of a Saturday morning and read the fixtures for the following week; for she knew as well as I did when the hounds were due. The sight of a pink coat set her tingling all over. A nursemaid in St. James's spying a guardsman in the offing never fluttered more in the innermost soul of her than fluttered my Kate at the bright coat, with its flapping tails and its promise of a breathless scamper behind the clotted brush of the wily one.

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So, up and off to the cover side, among all the other lady-horses and gentleman-horses—just as eager, just as full of beans, as we. In the crush at the bridle-path gate my little mare hangs back, for right ahead of her is a big roan with a bow of blue ribbon tied trickily in his tail. Crafty Katherina! She knows that that blue bow is the danger signal of a kicker—knows it as well as I do; and she's not

going to jeopardise her dainty forelegs to the possibility of a back-heel smasher from the spiteful roan. . . . There you are! With a squeal the fierce teetotaler lashes out within an inch of somebody's nose, and there's swearing and shouting and pounding in the mud; when suddenly a distant cry of *Forrard!* rings out far behind us, and we all swing round like a cavalry charge at the wheel—stirrups clink, foam flies, mud scatters; there's a low hedge ahead; there's a flash of disappearing hoofs as horses and riders glide over it like a boat glides over a wave; Kate (the little idiot) jumps it in her excitement as though it were a church; and we all tumble into the pastures in time to see the pack far ahead, streaming along Hunt's Closes in a spreading line, sterns up, noses down to a close scent, and travelling like an express train!

My laggard pen cannot follow the pelting varmint, now no bigger than a weasel to the eye, now a brown speck streaking across the green, and now—nothing. The pace is too hot; and rioting Katherina needs both hands to coax her into amiability and sober her scampering.

Gently, gently, Kitty darling! We're coming to the plough in a moment! Your pretty white stocking is mired out of all recognition. . . . Hold up—here's another fence! Now—*over!*

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I rub my eyes, and the dream fades. Kitty and the varmint and the plough are far away; and here in Fleet Street, the motor buses are hooting. But above their harsh riot the tumultuous music of the pack rings loud and clear. Hark forrard!

X.

THE REAL THING.

You know, of course, it's love that makes the world go round and keeps it spinning. All honour, then, to those noble souls whose business it is to supply us for small prices with enough heart-throbs to go round and to spare. Such a one is Mr. Charles Barnard, of the Elephant and Castle Theatre. He deserves a monument for his encouragement of the tender position, and his great labour as nurse-in-chief to the Renaissance of the British Blood Curdler. I accepted gladly his invitation to witness the production, on a Lavish Scale, of the beautiful love romance entitled, "The Love that Women Desire." I don't remember ever reading a criticism of that romance. I understand it is not subtle enough for Mr. Walkley's facile touch, or sufficiently analytic to interest Mr. Archer, whose philosophy gives us all so much rich food for thought once a week. More's the pity.

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I am not a dramatic critic; but my evening at the "Elephant" so cheered me that I cannot resist poaching just for once. The G string of the elemental twanged loudly at the very portals. In pairs, the people thronged to see the play—mostly young people, painted with the pallor of lower London, but eager for Romance. Up in the fourpenny gallery they sat, hand in hand, cheek to cheek, eyes ashine, and primeval hearts leaping to the wonders supplied, act by act, by Mr. Charles Barnard on his well known lavish scale! The aroma of the towering amphitheatre reminded me of the orange groves of Seville, slightly seasoned with shag smoke—for discreet clays were bubbling here and there. Little boys in Eton collars carried trays aloft, and cried,

shrilly, "Sendwiches! Pork-pie-or-piece-o'-cake—one penny!" Teething babies up in Olympus wailed in petulant music, which was lost in the elaborate starshine of the chandelier. A pair of hand-locked lovers behind me purred . . . and the curtain went up to a muted murmur of harmony symbolising the Dawn of Love. A hayfield—real hay—yokels—the Squire's beautiful daughter, Madge, with blazing black diamonds for eyes—the Squire's sweet ward Sibyl, with a heart much too big for her bodice—the Squire's son, Richard—the hero, Philip, with high heels, a voice like Irving, and a costume betwixt and between Romeo and William Terriss. Devil music from the orchestra. Enter Richard Abingdon, the villain—(hisses immediately from everywhere)—with petulant cigarette and designs upon the saccharine Sibyl.

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We soon discover that the Squire has been playing with the fortunes of his ward, and that his idea is for Richard to marry her at once, and get the family out of a muddle. But across the aromatic heaps of new-mown hay Sibyl's eye flashes the message to Philip, and Philip's optic heliographs the one and only reply. Haymakers revel, and retire to the beer tent. Gurgly music from the bassoon (the small bassoon). Enter a tramp on the verge of starvation. The hero and the tramp retire together to lunch, and the villain and Sibyl are left alone with the afternoon tea cups and the westering sun. Purple sunset music. . . .

THE VILLAIN (suddenly): Be mine! I love you!

SIBYL (flutteringly): Never!

The villain wraps his arms around her in an octopoid embrace.

SIBYL (gasping): Unhand me! Villain!

THE VILLAIN: Why—oh, why?

SIBYL: Because—because—the love you offer me is *not* the Love that Women Desire! (Screams. Strange strains from the band).

Richard gets on the half-nelson with dreadful savagery; and Sibyl's number is just going up when in rushes the hero with the tramp (now replete and grateful). What is it he sees? Angelina in the floaming torrent? Nay—worse, far worse than that! Smack! . . . Biff! . . . Ping! Oriflame eye and nine loose teeth for Richard! Rescue! Rescue! Theatre carols one long pæan of rapture as the curtain falls; and Eton collar trips in once more with the "sendwiches" and the cake.

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The next act is chiefly remarkable for a balcony scene by moonlight, such as Shakespeare might envy. Philip, in hunting costume and spurs (remember it is June, when the pack bays not except in Romance, S.E.), climbs the pillar to the chamber window of Sibyl, who emerges in a dazzling white robe. It is all so sweet! Moonlight on the twinkling spurs; language of love (the Love that Women Desire) on the balcony; nightingale strains from the orchestra.

PHILIP (passionately): Will you always love ma, Sibyl, ma sweet, ma love?

SIBYL: Al-ways! Tho' withered my body, my love will never die! My prince, my king . . . (*pianissimo* throbs on the big drum in imitation of the full young hearts on the balcony. Turtle-dove noises from the lovers behind me).

PHILIP: As long as I have breath. . . .

Baby up in the gods: Wow-wow-wowp!

Voice from the stalls: Give order there! Tike it aht and strengle it!

Baby is taken out and strengled, and the play proceeds.

Philip, now an outcast, is in the deadly, crocodile, lion, tiger, elephant, python, and ichthyosaurus-haunted swamps of Brazil, looking for diamonds with his pal the tramp. They have discovered £20,000 worth, and are just considering returning to town on the next L.G.O.C. motor bus, when the villain and his myrmidons steal in, collar the lot, and tie them up to a palm tree, with the intention of making Smithfield martyrs of them. Dried leaves are piled round them.

THE VILLAIN (striking a match upon the most accessible portion of his nether garments): Afterr you arre rreduced to hashes I will return to England and marry Sibyl! Where arre the bags of diamonds? ? ? ?

PHILIP: I will never forget this. You may reduce me to ashes an' you will; but I will not disclose the whereabouts of the diamonds. No! Never!

* * * * *

The funereal pyre is just lighted when the beautiful Maiquinha, an Indian maiden, rushes in with a tomahawk, and rescues the lot single-handed amid scenes in the auditorium, "easier imagined than described." Curtain.

And so to the last act. You know that it's all serene, because it is entitled, "Two Souls with but a Single Thought, Two Hearts that Beat as One!" We are back in England. Sibyl, who has broken her heart and lost her memory all in one fell swoop, is on the eve of marriage with the double-distilled villain, Richard, under the idea that he is her darling Philip. We all sob, though we know that the hour of dawn is at hand. There is a sweet little church—(l.)—to which enter first the bride and then the bridesmaids, with red roses in their hands. But where is the wicked bridegroom? Sh-h-h! Not a word! He's been drugged at the last

moment by the hero and the tramp, and he arrives all dishevelled and blear-eyed in time to see Sibyl and Philip cooing "I will" into each other's ears, with the tramp (suddenly materialising as Sibyl's long-lost papa) giving the blushing bride away. (Loud cheers). Observing this wholesale frustration of all his fell plans, the Squire gnashes his teeth in the porch, and passes away jerkily to the spasms of an apoplectic fit. And that's the very end. Virtue triumphant; no murder, but heaps of real curdling of the human gore!

* * * * *

Mr. Barnard, I thank you and Mr. Calton Wallace (who is both author and villain in this beautiful Love Romance), for giving me and the youth and beauty of Newington-butts such an evening of lavish slices out of real life. And so I hail the Renaissance, and shout with the gallery. Long life to it!

XI.

THE INTERLOPER.

With mild-eyed astonishment the super-elegant citizens of Greybourne, gazing out of their exclusive front windows some weeks ago, saw a short, furred gentleman of considerable girth steering a little green motor car clumsily along the main street. The car made a wavy passage. Its uncertain gait and its shrouded lamps emphasised the illusion of a blind man groping. Presently it stopped outside a neat little house with an auctioneer's board in the front garden, and the gentleman dismounted, and baring his head of the automobile accessories encumbering it—just as one leams a walnut —stood and beamed upon the premises in an attitude of

respectful worship, head on one side and squat legs wide apart.

"The very thing!" he was heard to observe. "The *very* thing!"

And so Mr. Jubb, of the City, became a country gentleman on the spot. He took the house, he decorated the front garden with two appallingly new plaster statues of Aphrodite and Ariadne in ***negligee;*** he brought down a piano, a wife, and other household necessaries; and he began immediately to ingratiate himself with the inhabitants.

He was Bohemian; he knew many journalists and artists up in London, where he was an eloquent ornament of a go-as-you-please vagabond club (whose Order of Merit dangled in circumferent gold at the most protuberant jut of his waistcoat). In this club he held the envied office of Keeper of the Jewel of the Rare and Remarkable Order of Tom-tits, Fully Fledged, and of the Right Sort. His age was fifty-two, but his heart was the heart of a little child. Benevolence not only shone from his face; it blazed from his bald crown like the sun at mid-day.

* * * * *

In an innocent and revelrous moment he decided that Greybourne needed waking up. "There's no Go in the place," said Mr. Jubb, waving a wide hand toward the somnolent Tudor houses, the prim green blinds and the placid flower pots of ultra-respectability. "Greybourne has no vim; it is vegetable—vegetable!" So, he began to see to it.

Having friends in the printing trade, he started by producing, with some secrecy, the "Greybourne Gazette Christmas Annual," and invited a black and white artist down for the week end for the fell purpose of caricaturing the leading inhabitants.

The drawings came in—splendid nightmares, sketched in the caricaturist's best vein, and recognisable. Mr. Jubb himself was there, once in the frosty trappings of Father Christmas, and once as a seraphic Tom-tit, bearing the jewel of the order, triumphant; there was the butcher, the grocer, the publican—all, indeed, of the distinguished elect of Greybourne, with their names Latinised in bold print over their heads so that there should be no mistake.

Meanwhile, our eager friend, alight with local patriotism, fixed upon a Social Flare-up in the schoolroom. He himself was no mean acrobat upon the flageolet, his wife "could do anything" with the piano, and he discovered voices (hitherto undreamt of) in Greybourne.

* * * * *

Already the village was beginning to rock, imminent of social upheaval. Whenever Mr. Jubb passed the Tudor houses, on foot or in his trepidatious little green car, he was frowned upon ogreishly by the refined householders, growled at by pedigree bulldogs at the end of their chains, and frozen by boreal glances from the prim and proper Tudor ladies. Little cared he, for just now he was in the throes of composition, with a rhyming dictionary and a calf-bound copy of Mrs. Hemans' poems ever his constant companions. He was at work upon the Greybourne Anthem, "to be sung with heart and soul, all upstanding," and produced ten verses, rousing music by Mrs. J., and flageolet obligato by the author. Everybody's name was mentioned, and I am graciously allowed to quote two verses:—

Ours is the finest vill-i-age that ever you could see;
Its streets sublime, its houses fine, its hearts both gay and free;
Its homely atmosphere *eclat* the tend-rest passion rouses
In nineteen hundred human souls and twenty public-houses—
Chorus—At Greybourne, Greybourne, GREYBOURNE!

So when you come to Greybourne, remember this, I pray,
Taste Tompkyns' Finest Sausages before you go away ;
If with internal pangs you're rent, or hungry is your maw,
Try Peterson's Persuasive Pills or Swaffer's Grocery Store—

Chorus—At Greybourne, Greybourne, GREYBOURNE !

Of course, there had to be poetic tribute to the musical abilities of the place. With infinite skill, Mr. Jubb brought in his own favourite instrument to a gallant rhyme :—

So thump the drum and blow the lute (!) and sing, O sweet quartet,
The banjo thrum, the bassoon hum, and eke the flageolet. . . .

* * * * *

After trying this over on the piano, Mr. Jubb fancied that the counterpoint of the flageolet obligato was a wee bit out, so he took it to town and got a real musician to punctuate it. There were tremendous rehearsals in the Jubb drawing-room, and all went well until the morning of Christmas Eve, when the local Choir and the Christmas Annual burst simultaneously upon the astonished inhabitants. The Annual was delivered in a neat wrapper from door to door through the snow.

The Vicar was thunderstruck at the appearance on his exclusive lawn of a motley crowd in various hideous disguises, among which could be plainly distinguished the proud form of Mr. Jubb as a Teddy Bear, prancing valorously, flageolet at lip and strident lungs at full pressure. The Anthem burst. . . .

Furiously his reverence rang the bell. " Thomas ! " he hissed, " turn those—those—tramps off the lawn at once ! " And he jerked down the blinds to hide the horrid sight. With some sinking at the heart, Mr. Jubb re-marshalled his forces and harmoniously invaded the Tudor houses. But they

refused to see the joke, and also pulled the blinds down. Mr. Jubb sobbed into the mouthpiece of his flageolet, for his golden heart was sore. And when he got home after the fiasco, an ominous envelope was handed to him. Its contents were short and bitter.

> "After the indecent exhibition you have made of yourself with your so-called newspaper and its scurrilous libels, and your attempt this morning to turn the respectable streets of Greybourne into a howling bear-garden, we, the undersigned, strongly urge you to return to the asylum from which you have escaped. You are a disgrace to any law-abiding community."

This was signed by the chairman of the Parish Council, the vicar, most of the leading tradesmen, and every one of the Tudor houses.

* * * * *

Back in town that very evening, Mr. Jubb, bearing aloft the Jewel of the Rare and Remarkables through a choking fog of tobacco smoke, was cheered by his fellow Bohemians to the echo, and when the Venerable Grand Tom called upon Brother Samuel for a solo upon the flageolet, the tears welled once more. For verily, Mr. Jubb was at Home, and the Tudor houses vanished through the reek. Greybourne was millions of miles away.

"Gentlemen!" said he. "In place of my usual instrumental contribution to the harmony of the evening, I will attempt a modest little composition of my own. It is entitled, "The Greybourne National Anthem!" (Loud cheers).

Mr. Jubb produced a roll of music, and spreading it out, placed it in front of the pianist. . . .

"I hope you will all join in the chorus—with heart—and soul. . . .'

XII.

SEEING LIFE.

"ARE you The Gentleman for Polhaven?" asked the station-master, as the tiny train pulled up in a wedge carved out of the Cornish cliffs, where a little river sang blithely at the sight of the sea and gurgled as she met it. "Because, if you are, Peter Pengelly's waiting for you outside, with the Shandry. . . ."

It was a pleasant experience for an atom whirled out of the maelstrom of London to materialise suddenly on the edge of England, and to be greeted by an official with gold lace on his cap as "The Gentleman for Polhaven." My spirit lifted. I wondered if a shilling was enough when the station-master himself seized my bags and led the way to Peter and the shandry—outside. I imagined the shandry to be something like the spider-wheeled phaeton in which M. St. Ives and Master Rowlay drove so merrily across England in the days of romance, with, perhaps, a touch of Yorick's sober coach in the Sentimental Journey. But—no! It was a contrivance half-hearse and half fire-engine, in which we dashed down the cobbled street. It was painted light scarlet. As we gathered speed and the sparks flew from Jinny's clattering shoes, I had to restrain a violent impulse to cry, "Hi-hi-hi!" Jinny, with her head high and the white foam flying, bore me towards the flaming sunset. Pegasus was never surer-footed; but it was dark before the steep narrow streets of Polhaven engulfed us in a grey dream of higgled houses gummed on to sheer cliff, and Jinny stopped of her own accord in a wedge of yellow light under the swaying signboard of The Ship Ahoy!

* * * * *

"I've brought The Gentleman," said Peter; and it was still a dream as the landlady, ample and warm-hearted,

bore me into my own room, where a fire of pine logs sang and hissed on the hearth, and a delicious smell of everything clean welcomed me. There was a harpsichord in the corner with a row of stuffed seagulls over it, all in an attitude of respectful attention. This was evidently the room where they have hymns on Sundays . . . an albatross's egg hanging from the curtain rod and an incredible number of shells everywhere emphasised the nautical flavour of the room. It seemed to sway, and I have since discovered that it has a decided list to starboard when a sou'-wester hums up the Cove. Well—this was my home for a month. Rest and quiet (said the prescription in my pocket), sea-air, sea-foam, seagulls, and sunshine D.V.), and a huge bottle of *dolce far niente*, to be taken as often as the occasion demands. I pulled off my boots before the singing fire, and the colour-scheme of the room surged . . . red velvet furniture, terra cotta wall paper, brass fireirons poised tragically over a vast spittoon of white enamel, a mahogany mirror frilled all around with crinkly pink paper, a huge oleograph of Raphael's "Tête de Jesus" in a huge gold frame, a spotted print of the Marquess of Hartington (richly bearded and childishly simple in features), and to crown all, a startling oil painting of my chubby host, as he may have been in 1880. There was a Romney touch in this positively irresistible.

* * * * *

A high-breasted young woman bustled in with supper. She said her name was Mabel . . . and would I have the warming pan? She would look after me—never fear! And she is still doing it so thoroughly that there's scarcely a shred of my soul left to call my own. I was whisked to bed at ten, and it was more ghostly than ever up in that low-ceiling'd room, plastered with illuminated texts, all framed in white,

and all very gratifying to an easy conscience. Over my slumbers watched two enormous china dogs. They sat quietly on the chest of drawers, glassily white, with eyes wide open, with golden chains linked over their backs and great golden spots splashed over their bodies with awful regularity. They were the kind of animals a man sees (occasionally) after many years of irregular spirituous life. . . . I awoke at two a.m. Sirius, the brightest star in the heavens, was blazing into the room, with the rest of the pack of Canis Major in full cry high over the hill. In the fairy glimmer I could see that my two china guardians were restless. They were tugging at their golden chains and anxious to be away. There was an unutterable yearning in their fixed faces; every instant I expected a crash of china, an unearthly howl. . . . I bade them lie down. A cloud drifted across the bright eye of Sirius, and I suppose they obeyed; for when the morning sunshine trickled through the window they were still there, uncracked and glistening. I hid them up the wide chimney, knowing nothing of their immense value. Another night with them would have wrecked me physically and spiritually.

* * * * *

I spent a pleasant and uneventful morning on the cliff watching the Cornish fishermen at work; leaning over the quay and spitting into the tide hour after hour must be as nerve-destroying as the "dreadful trade" of the samphire gatherers. I observed the weekly slaughter of the Polhaven pig—a grim procession down the narrow street, with Sammy gyved like Eugene Aram in their midst. All the animals here have names, and Sammy was a popular and highly esteemed inhabitant all the winter. *De mortuis!* There are worse things than Sammy sausages for breakfast!

In the afternoon the village broke out into a rash of

unrest. The fishermen took their hands out of their pockets and forgot to augment the tide. As I strolled down the harbour to tea I noticed a crowd outside the post office reading with absorbed interest a freshly-posted document. It was headed, "£1 reward," and referred to two dogs missing from the Ship Ahoy! I could not see the remainder for the press of the crowd. Even the butcher was there, though it was killing day, and the autopsy of Samuel was still half complete. . . . .

* * * * *

I rang the bell for tea. Mabel appeared, pale and flurried. "Tea!" she cried incredulously, as though I had asked for great auk's eggs on toast. "Tea? ?" And then she burst out with, "O, sir, them beautiful dogs—they be gone! And there's such a dreadful upset—and the missus's beside herself—and I'm all leary in my insides—and the police is coming, and . . ."

There was a clatter on the cobbles outside. I saw, dimly, the blue blur of the Polhaven policeman pass the window, with half Polhaven at his heels. And it was only after I heard a shy tapping at my door and the constrained breathing of (seemingly) thousands of excited souls behind it that I remembered Sirius flaming in the lustrous night and the restless fretting of my two china monstrosities crouching on the chest of drawers—and fitted the puzzle together!

"Come in!" I cried; and at the entry of a profoundly shy young constable, I thought I saw the left eyelid of the Marquess of Hartington flutter. We had a long interview, shot with passing glimpses of Bodmin gaol; and at the end of it I said: "Of course, officer, this is all *sub judice*." "Of course, sir," replied the Majesty of Polhaven, with immense dignity.

And that's why I can say no more about it at present.

XIII.

A CUCKOO NOTE.

DEARY me! Another crushed eggshell lying by the tall keck-roots in the long grass, with the soul of song sucked out of it, and bewildered mother Hedgesparrow, wondering what in the world has become of Jimmy as she sits, sore hearted, on the swaying thorn. The rapscallion, marauding pirate of copse and dingle has been at it again—bad cess to her. I heard her voice half-an-hour ago, chortling with an over-fed gurgle in it, drunk with egg-juice—"Coo-ook oo! Coo-ook oo!" Why does that wretched alien deliberately choose the delicate little sky-blue egg of the sweet, shy hedge-warbler "to make her voice clear?" Heaven, perhaps, can tell; I can't. For the hedgesparrow is one of our most charming song birds, with a tune more fitted for fairy-land than otherwhere. It is a soft little cascade of rippling sound, just over a whisper: the music that Titania used to call for when she was in her most amiable mood at early sundown of a midsummer evening.

* * * * *

But the cuckoo blunders into the hedge like a savage giant in Liliput-land. She's a trifle sore-throated after an overnight debauch, and she wants a pick-me-up. Hedge-sparrow egg-flip is the one thing recommended by the faculty, so she helps herself to poor little Jimmy. Away goes mother, diving in dire distress to the hedge-bottom in fear of her little brown life; and in next to no time James is an angel birdlet in a paradise where only the souls of converted cuckoos are allowed to roam. You may know—or you may not—that in the ancient Story of the Birds there is a Paradise and

a Tophet, with a nightingale choir in one and a grill for gluttons and the murderers in the other. Like man, the cuckoo—

> May laugh and riot till the feast is o'er ;
> Then comes the reckoning ; and he laughs no more.

Believe me, he gets " beans " in the next world. For ever and ever he is doomed to suck scorpions' eggs, to " cuck-oo " backwards, and build nests for vultures on invisible rocks which are ever collapsing in mid-air. Serve him right, say I. And so would you if you knew him as I do.

This spring I have made a close study of the cuckoo ; and I should like to write a Blue-book (hedgesparrow-egg-blue) for the Board of Ornithology, recommending to the president of that board that the cuckoo should be treated as an undesirable alien, in spite of all the pretty things that poets (from Shakespeare downwards) have said about him. Wordsworth was quite inane when he wrote :—

> Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring,
> Even yet thou art to me
> No bird ; but an invisible thing,
> A voice—a mystery.

Like most poets, he was wrong in his facts, and shockingly shortsighted. He says he never saw the cuckoo, though its " babbling note " made him look

> a thousand ways
> In bush, and tree and sky.

I have seen it scores of times. I have lain in the long grass on a sun-warmed hill and watched the beggar at work at nesting time. The wicked bird looks what she is—the embodiment of rascality ; a peering, prying, long-bodied, jerky-tailed, ring necked, heartless housebreaker. She lopes along the hedgerows and the spinneys and the blackthorn

clumps as silently as a burglar moves with his socks over his boots when he's a-prowl on a crib-cracking expedition.

* * * * *

She is a coward, for she only raids the poor little soft-billed birds. And she's full of worldly knowledge, for she is aware that when the " sitting fever " is on a hen, that bird will sit on anything hard and round, from a liver pill to a potato, according to the size of the brooder. So she finds a nice neat little nest, and either frightens mamma off, or waits until she has slipped away for her morning exercise, sucks an egg for luck, and then deposits her own ; and hey presto ! away she goes with a nasty, selfish chuckle at her own craftiness.

Goodness knows how many eggs she lays in a season. Half-a-dozen, perhaps. From the days of Gilbert White onward, naturalists have quarrelled over that point, and over another, far more interesting, which is : why cuckoos do not run their own households and build their own nests like decent birds. It is said that there is something in the anatomical structure of the ***cuculus canoras*** (to give the beast its scientific name) to prevent its performing all the duties of incubation ; but other birds—notably the goat-sucker, or fern owl—are built in almost identically the same mould ; so we can only conclude that the cuculus is merely lazy, and leave it at that ! Slattern !

A pair of robins once built in the ivy in my garden wall. One morning, when they were away on a worm-hunting tour next door, a cuckoo called and left a great, fat egg in their snug little bed. They returned soon after the fell deed had been accomplished, and I never in my life saw two such surprised and scandalised birds. It was really laughable to watch their antics. First, the hen went in by the front

door. She returned immediately, and joined her mate with her feathers all a-swell like an angry tom cat's tail. "Did you ever!!" she shrilled in her tiny, high treble. "What do you think has happened? Just go in and have a look at them eggs, cockie!"

Cockie obeyed, and presently he emerged, and said as plain as bird ever said, "Well, I'm d——d!" Then they both disappeared in the ivy, to gaze at the interloping egg, and to chatter over this most remarkable happening. In the end they decided to make the best of a bad job, and sat hard in turn, until one fine morning the giant oval (like the roc's egg in the Eastern tale) fell to pieces, and a great ugly, ravenous thing was hatched—a monstrosity all mouth and tummy, and everlastingly screaming for food. It would take anything; I don't believe tintacks would have come amiss to the terror.

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As soon as the pin-feathers began to arrive, I took pity on Mr. and Mrs. Robin, and put Master Cuckoo in a cage with a wide-meshed wire covering and fed it myself with anything that came handy—oatmeal, potatoes, cheeserind, hard-boiled egg, chops, steaks, cutlets, and so on. That gave the robins time to look after their own natural brood; but whenever they found a particularly fat and juicy worm they would always being it to the cage and give it to the cuckoo. And when it was big enough to fly, and the foster parents found that it could not leave the cage, their perturbation was too sad for anything. They tried to poison it first with all manner of weird things, unaware of the fact that nothing short of prussic acid would disagree with the digestion or upset the organic apple-cart of a cuckoo. They brought it stones, snail shells, thorns, bees, woolly spiders—everything that they could carry. Down the whole lot went, plop! and the

cuckoo still cried and screamed for more. I have seen thrushes do the same thing with their own caged young, and succeed inside an hour where these poor little birds tried hard for days. But when the robins found that they could not poison master cuckoo, they took counsel together one fine evening in the ivy, entered stealthily his cage while he slept, and in a grand, concerted movement pecked his eyes out.

And so he died. I shed no tears. But the robins were overcome with remorse, and cried their beady little eyes out. Such are life's ironies!

XIV.

COMPANIONS OF TRAVEL.

Upon this attractive subject I am the supreme egoist; if you care to run your eye down this careless column, dear reader, you will find it splashed, bespattered, and encumbered with the eternal ego. The capital "I" predominates—runs riot over hill and dale, soars to the stars, skims the oceans, plumbs the rivers, Puck-girdles the earth; and in the end tucks itself up to dream bachelor dreams in a truckle-bed solitarily happy in an attic of the Axe and Compasses!

I have tried companions the world over, but we have never hit it, somehow. When I was a very small boy, and the woodland was my home, my one aim in life was to be a keeper, alone with birds and beasts and bogies. A little later, 'twas a policeman—a country policeman, mind you, with miles and miles of solitary hedgerow and highway to watch. Later still, 'twas the Man in the Moon I envied most of all; and I envy him still as he sits in the lighted window of his house and sails across the world all by his jolly self upon

glorious, lonely journeys—past innumerable stars, high over the pains and the throbs of mundane mortals glued to that rolling clod men call the earth. He is content, for he is a philosopher; an aerial Diogenes in a transparent tub ever on the move amid the Immortals. Lucky chap!

As such would I be. With myself for a companion, we two never quarrel. Upon a pearly morning we set out, hand in hand, on a journey—never mind where. These journeys have the most surprising beginnings and middles and endings. The sun is climbing lustily, the larks are at their orisons—wee dots in the blue, discoursing magical music—the dew smokes lightly in the misty distance, and as we foot it over the green,

> God's in His Heaven,
> All's right with the world!

Ah, what a world! The smoke of London, the fierce fires of Fleet Street lie—somewhere over there. I point the direction out to my companion of travel—right over there, northward, where the magpie's ragged nest tosses high in an elm top, with the baby pies screeching lustily for breakfast. Further, further yet, until you come to a smudge in the sky, and under that smudge crouch and growl editors, with their very presence darkening Heaven! My companion chuckles, for we are in tune together, he and I, this morning. On we go, blithely. There is a hill to climb—a towzle-haired, rough-featured old hill. Up, up, we mount, with here and there a plover rising in alarm from her domestic hearth and crying mournfully. "Kee-eep away—Kee-eep away—pleeease."

Any other companion but mine would, perchance, talk menus at once if he knew that these weird-winged wailers *were* plovers. He would sink instantly to the stomach, and worship his god for Heaven knows how long, enlarging upon hard-boiled plover's eggs, lapwings on toast, and swinging

round presently to Mr. Lyons and the Troc—and so on, *ad infinitum et ad nauseam*. Table-talk, with never so much as a sniff of Hazlitt in it! That is where I score with my companion. Not so very long ago I went on a moorland walk with a very good fellow whose Bible is Jorrocks, and whose name is Reginald—a fine combination over the fences and at a hunt breakfast.

Far, far down in a sweet valley a flock of sheep fed on the green, with the sun full on them—a pastoral picture inviting the observer to cast all things aside and become on the spot a poet in Arcadia. We gazed some time. Then Reginald essayed to speak. "'Straordinarily like maggots movin' about in a green cheese, eh what?" said he, wagging a finger at the fleecy dots in the distance. So much for the point of view. Alas Arcady—with Reginald in it! I led him to a grove where turtle-doves were making croodling love. Reginald talked pigeon-pie, and in desperation I turned the conversation into tureens, and rhapsodised on turtle soup. "In Rome, turn Roman," said I to myself.

Thus it is with so many companions of travel. It is necessary to be sociable and to talk. You must be in tune. One of the two may falter on the way with a sore heel or a stitch in the side, or a touch of the sun; he goes on grimly, suffering dire agonies; and very likely his companion is twinging with pains all the time.

My particular companion is never like that. We have tramped it together so long that harmony is always assured. We talk the most outrageous nonsense to one another, I and myself. Lying in the long grass, this summer's afternoon, we have watched the tiny population of that domain going about its bustling business, and we have weaved all manner of romantic nonsense about them. I remember

discovering all the members of the parish council of Grassville; the fat churchwarden in his bottle green coat; the blacksmith; the parson in sober black; the sporting squire, and all the rest of 'em! My companion dug out of a dry keck root the village idiot, the sexton, and the murderer of Phyllis, the beautiful milkmaid. And they were all insects, to a man! The churchwarden was a green fly, the squire a half-awake wood-louse, the village idiot a crock-legged grasshopper, Phyllis a ladybird, with a red gown spotted with black, and her murderer a grisly black spider.

Then a centipede sprawled into the picture, and the whole scene was suddenly changed, with Mr. Hundred-legs as a dragon, and the rest of the population all funky denizens of the dark ages. All sheer nonsense, of course; but are we not travelling slow-foot through Arcady in an English summer, just where and when the spirit moves us? We play the fool merrily, following the dancing Jack o' Lantern of our fancy up hill and down dale wherever the wanton boy led us.

And we're doing it now, I and myself—the choicest of companions on a holiday. I began this random scrawl at sunrise this morning on the back of a letter from the editor asking for "that companion article" by return of post. I am finishing it at sundown by the light of a candle in the Axe and Compasses; with my companion looking—somewhat critically I fancy—over my shoulder, and telling me not to forget Mr. Hundred-legs and the churchwarden and the village idiot, and lots of other things which I have forgotten, after all.

A soothing aroma of roast comes from the kitchen. . . . Presently we shall go out into the clear night of stars, into a sleeping village where no street lamps shine, and over which my old friend, the Man in the Moon, is a late riser to-night.

No doubt were my friend Reginald with me he would stumble out into the dusky street, and, sniffing the cool air of the aromatic evening, would trot out a text from the immortal Jorrocks—"Hellish dark; and smells of cheese!"

But Reginald is far away, and the stars need not shiver in their velvet realm for fear of his metropolitan tongue.

XV.

THE TRAGIC SPOUSE.

"THERE," said my young friend, who is an epigrammist by choice and a lover by chance (he is to be married next week) —"there goes a man with no future, married to a woman with a past!"

You all know that man; the world knows him as "the husband of Mrs. X." A pitiable picture, truly! He has all the semblance of a man. A full beard flows gallantly over his chest; his proportions are pleasing to the eye; he is well groomed, well fed, and valiant is his stride. But there is a furtive something in his eye which says as plain as whisper in the ear that he is haunted!

He is for ever looking over his shoulder; he sees the shadow, though you may not. For all his pretty clothes and his pot-valiance, he's a worm, and he knows it! He is only out on sufferance. The hour will come presently when he will don the cloak of Invisibility. Ample though he may be, the amplitude of madame will blot him out—absorb him. At his best he is no more than an inconsiderable item of his lady's drawing-room furniture, to be classed with her books and her bric-a-brac. It is easy to imagine a state of society (or

bondage) wherein he, and such as he, would be relegated to a glass case—to be taken out and dusted occasionally. . . .

* * * * *

Alas! the noble profession of Husbandry. What are we coming to, we husbands, in this year of grace? What dismal tales can we not unfold! What kind of wives marry us—and why? Can you find me anywhere, in this enlightened age of ours, a man bold enough for a Lochinvar, or masterful enough for a Count Richard tearing his fair Jehane, blushing, from the very altar rails of Saint Sulpice, and slashing his way through the armèd crowd, for love?

Romance? The very word scares us, and we tremble in our shiny patent leathers. The Sabines of South Kensington and elsewhere have raped us; the tables are turned! We are no longer lords in our high domain. Like the Spectre of Canterville, we are poor, complaining, muling ghosts of our once mighty selves. London town teems with Invisible Husbands. Bloomsbury is the grey graveyard sacred to the stalkings of most of them, and Brixton is its suburb—that airy area, whose streets are so healthy because the inhabitants never open their windows.

In the mists of the early morning when the world is asleep and the lone cats crawl, one may see huddled, humped figures taking the air dolorously round about Guildford Street, Doughty Street, and the Corams, Great and Little—in temporary materialisation. They are the miserable husbands of that vast and stern-featured clan, the Bloomsbury Landlady. In the daytime they are not; at night they are little more than visions flitting along dismally with shoulders bent through much boot-cleaning and mouths pitiably adroop. Watch them walking upon their toes in a perpetual tremor of hush. Through many harsh years of meniality in the

frowsy, cat-scented gloom of the backyard, they have been trained to this desperate Agagism. They are mere conveniences, poor devils!

* * * * *

Sometimes, I believe, they are used as levers for the rent. I heard of a landlady once, when cajolery and invective failed to coax the rent from a reluctant lodger, who threatened to call in her Husband. Here was the foundation for a fine comedy after the manner of Mr. Oliver Goldsmith; but it went no further. Out of sheer sympathy for the husband, the lodger paid.

Take, again, the husband of the charwoman. What part does he play in this grim pantomime of humanity? Where does the Temple laundress hide her spouse? How does she treat him? What are his credentials? Peradventure, her husband is, more often than not, a lean and slippered barrister who has fallen upon barren times, having failed at the law and the law's last sanctuary—journalism. A mean, grey man with a degree and debts, and an occasional corner in the Rainbow (whenever the Lady of Char is kind), I can picture him in his last phase of mated melancholy . . . the secret husband. I am sure there are many such strange ornaments of their Inns who, by force of cruel necessity, have awakened from their dream of the Woolsack to the clammy reality of quondam lord and master of the scrubbing-brush and the feather-duster.

* * * * *

Last in my little catalogue (though there might be many more) is the man most to be pitied of all—the husband of the Principal Boy. Presently we shall see her queening it upon a hundred stages as Jack the Giant Killer, Robinson Crusoe, Richard Whittington, Sinbad, Prince Charming,

and a round fat dozen more. She's a respectable matron with her "lines" crinkling behind that marvellous corsage of hers. The plumper the limb, the plumper the salary she draws.

The Boy can show a leg better than Sir Willoughby at his best. "Prince Charming!" What a name to conjure with on a Boxing night. How regally she prances in the searching eye of the blue limes; how the gods up in high Olympus rise at her, the flashing, dashing spirit of true pantomime! But one night she is husky and "off colour." . . . She goes home (that grim annexe to Pantomime's porphyry halls) with anger in her breast . . . and beats her husband! Imagine the thuds. Fifty Prince Charmings pummelling fifty husbands; oh—oh—oh! For they do—they do!

* * * * *

They, and such as they, must have a sorry time. No doubt, they sob and bear it. But let them take heart. I have sought and found a solace for this benighted brotherhood. I have in my mind's eye the establishment of an Unhonoured Husbands' Club. The entry fee for my club shall be small (as it would need to be), but the qualification for membership strict. Once inside the portals of the Husbands' Club, my elected members will be able to breathe, unraided and unfettered, the sweet air of splendid individualism for brief but happy spells. Here they will be able to meet and exchange experiences and confidences, unafraid, within the hearing of an unmarried stenographer, to whose transcript I, as President of the club, shall have access for the purposes of my great human Epic in Ten Volumes.

There shall be a statuette in alabaster of Petruchio over the mantelpiece in the main saloon, magnums of Lethe water constantly on tap behind the bar, and high-priced

liqueurs of deadly poison at hand (at a price) for the irredeemable. And whenever a Principal Boy becomes a widow, the club will supply a handsome wreath for the corpse's consolation, at my own expense. The club premises will be situated in Middlesex Street.

XVI.

THE VALLEY OF CONTENT.

GIVE me for my happiness the morning sky swept clean and blue by summer wind, the ardent sun all smiles, and earth and air fragrant with Nature's perfume and melodious with birds. It must be far, far from the jangle of Town, and away from the high road, so that not the faintest hum of humanity's strife can trespass there. Such spots are hard to find, and harder still to keep in these breathless, tear-away days: mine is still unspoilt by the flight of ages; but—Read and you shall discover.

Year after year glides on, and things are still the same; the same old willows lean over the little brook as on that memorable day when I, a small child, venturing far beyond the hill, struggled through the mighty forest of tall grass following a baby rabbit, and so became hopelessly lost—until a beautiful black-haired fairy came along, and telling me that her name was Nina, led me through mysterious places and put me on the path again.

* * * * *

"I live over there," she said, shaking her elf-locks and waving a little brown hand toward a clump of elms where the merest feather of blue smoke told the tale of home and dinner. "Come again some day!"

So I promised ; and never minded the spanking I got and the dinner I missed—for Nina's sweet sake.

The next day I found the place again, after mighty adventures. The sky was bluer and more full of deep mystery than skies are now, and I remember wondering, as I looked up and saw the swifts darting overhead like shaftless arrow-heads, how ever it could be possible even for saints on earth to get to Heaven on a day like that, so immeasurably far off and intangible it seemed. On the way I slew several dragons and one Giant (for I was steeped in those days in the Faerie Queen and the immortal epic of Mr. Bunyan) ; and was running full tilt from a curious and harmless bumble-bee, when I plumped into the arms of my fairy—Nina.

* * * * *

" Cowardy, cowardy custard ! " she chanted ; but I told her I was her Red Cross Knight, and this was enchanted land. Her eyes grew big with wonder, and she speedily fell in with my whimsy, to become my Lady—Una (with her lyon), Medina, Claribell, and sometimes the wicked damosell Excesse, which she loved (being a woman) most of all. Thus it was that I had to kill her many times and oft ; and it touched my heart grievously to see her die, horribly besmeared with the gore of squashed blackberries. In exchange for my Knights and Ladyes and Goblins and Enchantments, she taught me the lore of the woodland and the water-brook. Whenever I had a penny to spend, I would fill my plumed helm with old Rhoda's " Extry Strong Peppermingts," and carry them to our Happy Valley, where I would find my dear sitting in a fairy ring, dreadfully enchanted. And I would repeat :

> You spotted snakes with double tongue,
> Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen ;
> Newts and blindworms, do no wrong,
> Come not near our Fairy Queen !

The enchantment would deepen (we were Oberon and Titania now), and Nina's velvet eyes would be veiled in a semblance of sleep. . . .

> What thou seest when thou dost wake,
> Do it for thy true-love take.

In between the ruby lips would be popped an Extry Strong, and if Nina crunched a wee bit, so interfering with the natural dissolution of the peppermingt, the spell would be broken. Linkéd sweetness long drawn out was our motto in those delicious days; with such a rule carefully obeyed, it was wonderful how far a pennyworth would go, and how long the Enchantment would last! The time of year might change, and the woodland scents change with it—the sweet, soft perfume of the early violet, the almost imperceptible, warm-new-milk scent of the cowslips, the aroma of the sweet briar, the may, the woodbine, and the meadowsweet; across the years I remember them all; but for me, the secret glades and the rabbits' footpaths Nina and I trod in our enthralling childhood, making magic out of spiders' webs and telling the time o' day by blowing the dandelion seed from its tall, hollow stalk were for ever bathed in the intoxicating perfume of old Rhoda's Extry Strongs.

What days! What delights! Those long, long, drowsy noons, whose magic was only broken by a distant voice of an ogre I never saw (graciously hidden in the shade of the elms)—

"Nee-na—Nee-ner—dinner's ready!"

And one day, in answer to that shrill summons, I hurriedly disenchanted my elfin companion, after killing her twice (she was, at her own special request, the naughty damosell Excesse that morning), my Nina, slightly panged with mortal hunger, kissed me an aromatic good-bye . . . and I have never seen *my* Nina since.

But in the summer-time I still visit our Happy Valley, and time cannot wither its delights for me. The same old willows hang over the little brook; but they are older and more grandfatherly now. They lean and nod, nod and lean, over the tinkling stream, gnarled old gentlemen—some of them bald and stubbly, and some with their silver hair making whispery noises as the evening breeze caresses them. Dear old ancients—they sadly need a crooked stick to lean upon, so tottery are they!

The other evening I revisited the glimpses of the moon, and for the first time trod the winding path along which Nina used to vanish to a black dot in the Beyond . . . sweet little love of yesteryear! It led me through the elms, tall and dark, through a wicket-gate, and so on to the high road—where I never imagined high road to be.

* * * * *

There stood a house of grim new thatch and whitewash, and over the door a sign:

NINA JUDKINS,

Licensed to Sell Beer and Tobacco.

Not to be Drunk on the Premises.

I entered. A stout woman, with black hair tightly sewn with curling-pins, came forward.

Said I, softly:

> What thou seest when thou dost wake,
> Do it for thy true-love take.

"Eh?" said Nina, and her eyes grew big, just as they did on that long-ago day of our childhood's meeting in the Happy Valley. "Eh—what?"

I called to mind the never-failing spell.

"Do you sell peppermingts—extry strongs?" said I, waving my hand with the dear old Enchantment action. But it failed to act; something had gone wrong with the works. Fear came into Nina's face—the fear of the defenceless sane brought suddenly face to face with the dangerous lunatic. The muscles tightened round her mouth.

"No!" she cried, fiercely; and slammed the door.

* * * * *

Eheu fugaces!

XVII.

THE LADY OF THE STAR.

THE beckoning finger appeared to me very early and the veiled figure behind it whispered, "Follow me; the Land of Delight is this way!" Whenever I could play truant from the poignant realities of childhood and its small tasks and bewilderments, I obeyed. The sun shone and the skies were blue (is it not always so in the tender age?), and there was a hill far away that I fain would climb. It was a hill in the west. The sun went to bed behind it most gloriously, and I knew that over its crest I should find Joy and all the beautiful things that children dream of—sweet things to eat, nests of birds in every bush, the wild things of the woods friendly and conversational, and, best of all, human companions of the right age to understand and appreciate my point of view.

I made many gallant but futile attempts to reach that happy land; it was weary travelling, and no beaten road lay that way. Somehow, I had never met anybody who had been there. Even my grandfather, who was a great journeyer,

did not seem to know the mystery of that unattainable Beyond. He was a man of vigorous piety, with a fine pulpit voice, and a long bushy beard—like the picture of Moses in our old, leather-bound family Bible at home. A dozen parishes knew the beat of his vigorous theology, a dozen pulpits were wont to creak under his Christian tread, but if there were any Bethel over my hill, he was a stranger to it. Once I pointed to the flaming sunset and asked him if he had ever been there. "No," said he, "but I shall some day—and it will not be long!" I smiled at the thought of an old gentleman with a beard trespassing in my fairyland . . . but perhaps we had each misunderstood!

* * * * *

One night, when the house was still, I awoke in the summer starshine and set out valiantly for my Eldorado. The alluring hand still pointed the way, lambent athwart the shadows. I knew that the night was too beautiful for anything to harm me; no goblins lurking in the churchyard shadows dare venture into the astral shower of pure light. High, high above, the tinkle-music of the little stars seemed to make crystal cascades of sound where they all crowded together in the diamond street of the Milky Way. No doubt they laughed to see a little mortal trudging along on his wild-goose chase, through the long grass and under the gossamer viaducts built by the fairies.

On the road, I met an old dog-fox with a jowl as grey as my grandfather's. At a sudden impulse I asked him the way to my hill, for the sky had clouded, and I was not sure.

"Straight on—straight on," said he. "It is the only way for boys—and foxes. Good-night and good hunting!"

And with a whisk of his grizzled brush he vanished on his own private business. I had wished to ask him many more

questions, for a Reynard so old as he, and gifted with a talking tongue, must have been preternaturally wise; but he had gone—and there was an end of him!

I hurried onward and upward; surely this was my Hill at last! Over the summit I saw the Hand again, pointing earthward, and the owner of it—a fair woman, tall and stately, with a star shining like a beacon in her hair. But her face was grave and inscrutable. Books I could read, and well, were there romance, or battle, or sometimes a little love in them; but this grave lady, with her unfathomable eyes, was a riddle to me, incomprehensible. And all around voices were speaking, and the air moved and eddied with the beating of invisible wings. In some of the voices there was a ring of triumph; in others—and these were more numerous—the dirge of unutterable sadness gloomed like a funeral bell. Some clamoured bitterly, but not a word of any could I understand.

* * * * *

"Ah, little boy," said the Lady of the Star, "what is it you seek?"

"If you please," I replied, "is this the place where the sun sets? Have I really found it at last?"

"This is the place," said the Lady of the Star.

"It is a very mournful place," I whispered. "And I have come so far!"

"That is what they all say," answered the Lady, smiling ever so sadly. "This is the valley we call Attainment, and it is not a place for little boys. It is only through much tribulation and pain that men and women venture here, and after they are grey and sad. And when they do arrive they say, wonderingly, 'Is this all?' Little boy, you, who are always dreaming, have been brought here in a dream! When

many years have passed, come again—when you have rubbed shoulders with the armoured world—when you have fought a thousand battles, each harder than the first—when Love has claimed you for her own or spurned you like a jade—when you have followed with dragging feet the lure of life . . . come again! Then you will be able to understand what is spoken in the Valley of the Voices, and who they be that beat their wings in the night."

"And shall I see you?" asked the little boy.

"Maybe," said the lady.

* * * * *

Then it was that I awoke to the stars paling before the dawn, and the drowsy twitter of sparrows in the ivy. As I lay and wondered the sun rose, and presently my hill-top flamed gorgeously in the far distance, framed in the square of my open window, more beautiful than ever. That was because it was so far away, I suppose. . . .

Since then, I and you, my friend, have passed many a milestone on the road to the valley over the hill—halting at some, and half wishing we had never set out because of the bitterness of it, but taking fresh courage with the morning sun, and marching on, because, perhaps, someone had smiled, or another had said, "That is good!" or a third had stood by curling his lip scornfully as we passed, and so spurred us on. Why, we are not so sure; but the lure is there, and we follow it in spite of ourselves. We do not know what we shall find at last, when the hill is climbed, or whether there will be safe anchorage in the valley on the other side. That is why life, and the living of it, is so alluring. Since the world started spinning it has been the same; and so it will continue to the end.

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After all, my valley may be a chimera, and when I get there—if ever I do—and meet once more the Lady of the Star, I fancy she will say, with that sad, sweet smile of hers, " There is another Hill beyond ! "

XVIII.

THE SEA-LADY.

It was a calm night in the Cove. In the black sky of frost stars glitter like Parisian diamonds, and even the broad feather of the Milky Way was a blaze of light. The sea might have been a sheet of ice for the movelessness of it; it gave no sound but an occasional little shiver—a shiver with a tinkle in it—where a half-regretful wavelet kissed the shingle and then sank back to rest. Anon, the revolving flash of the Lizard Light cut like a mighty sword, sheathing its point among the stars, and at every stroke the myriad constellation of Heaven dimmed as the lighthouse flared. Slowly and stealthily the moon rose. . . .

In Widow Tripcunny's cottage on the very edge of the cliff, mild harmony reigned in the yellow beams of the hanging lamp—the wedding gift, just a year ago, of the fishermen of the Cove. The widow herself, buxom and bronzed, was a fine figure for the eye of any man, with her smooth black hair shining in the lamplight, and her quiet smile betraying milk-white teeth more often, perhaps, than the humour of the situation demanded. She moved busily among her guests—half a dozen fishermen, with Polly Blitho and her sister Kate—a couple of the prettiest Christmas " gooseberries " as you could find anywhere along the coast. Jan

Hoskin was openly courting the widow, and playing off the "gooseberries" craftily in a triangular duel of Love. A fat brown cask of smuggled brandy stood in the cool corner of the room. The blue smoke of long clays made an ever-shifting cloudscape (duty free) across the ceiling.

* * * * *

"Here's to his memory," said Jan, as he stirred the steaming glass and waved it towards the sea, under whose restless counterpane the lamented Samuel Tripcunny slept deeply, awaiting the last great haul.

The widow sobered, and her long lashes swept her cheeks as she replied, "Aye, poor Sam! He were a good soul, so far as men go. 'Twere a short mating——"

"An' a merry one, sure!" broke in the new lover.

"Not so merry," replied the widow. "There be husbands and—husbands, Mr. Hoskin. My man were mighty flightsome for one of his time o' life, with rovin' eye to spot a scarlet petticoat a mile away in a sea mist. It's more'n once I've hauled him home by the lug of his saucy ear——"

"There's others as has long ears!" rapped in Jan, twiddling his own, and sighing. "Not so saucy, per'aps, but——"

A sound at the door—more of a scrape than a knock—interrupted the gallant fisherman's wooing, and he gurgled in his glass as Mrs. Tripcunny moved to the door. She raised the latch and jumped back with a gasp as a blast of chill, unearthly wind swept into the room, and the nuptial lamp flared high and smokily, and the chimney cracked with a "ping" loud and clear.

A tall bearded form stood on the threshold swinging his icicle-fettered arms, and blinking his wide blue eyes exactly as Mr. Tripcunny blinked his on frosty days in the flesh. An

uncanny silence in the room was shattered by the astonished and indignant scream of the widow.

* * * * *

"Sam!" she cried, and brought up with a soft, fleshly thud at the edge of the table, so that all the glasses rang again.

"Aye—Sam it is!" replied the Wraith, chinking his icicles again, and rolling a pair of cod-like eyes. "Sam, as sure as Fate, and colder 'n Christmas!"

"But you're *dead*, Sam!" cried Jan Hoskin, and he could hardly get the words out of his mouth for the chattering of his teeth.

"Drownded in five-an'-twenty fathom, I be!" acquiesced the Corpse. "But it were a comfortable comin'-to on a sandy, shelly bottom—in the arms of as pretty a maid as you could wish for; savin' your presence, Mrs. T."

The widow shuddered and flung out her arms. "Jan!" she sobbed, and Jan whipped to her side, gripping her waist tight. A wheezy laugh came from the throat of old Sam.

"I found a job down there, turnin' my hand to the winter craft o' makin' serpentine ornaments for the mer-i-maids," he chuckled; "an' in the end they married me to one o' 'em—and she's give me an evenin' off to revisit the glimpses of th' moon, friends all!"

"You'd better step right in, and have a tot of your own spécial French, then," said Jan, making the best of an uncommonly bad job. "C-c-ome in, and be sociable, Sam, for old time's sake. It's a mighty clammy atmosphere you've brought with you, Mr.—er——"

"Tripcunny—still Tripcunny, Jan," said the Corpse, brightening up and moistening his blue lips. He moved into

the circle of light; and everybody else shrank back, as he helped himself to a stiff glass of the smuggled brandy.

* * * * *

"Ah!" he sighed, as the spirit smoked down. "There's some things they do a dern sight better on dry land—and French liquor's one of 'em! Here's very good health to you all, friends; and a Merry Christmas and a Glad New Year! And to the young couple"—he bowed mockingly to Mrs. Tripcunny and Jan—"a long life, and an 'appier spell o' wedded bliss than ever it was my luck to have on—er—this side of the—er—grave! Sarah, my gal, be a good, considerate miss'es to 'im——"

"Don't be a fool, Sam!" cried the widow, beside herself. "Have some decency, for mercy's sake!"

"Tut, tut!" rejoined the Corpse, blinking his eyes. "You mustn't mind me! This is only a fleetin' visit, but I don't mean to outstay my welcome!" His voice trembled to vanishing point.

"Have another glass, Sam," said his rival, lifting the kettle off the hob. "Don't say that old friends are unneighbourly!"

"Well," replied Mr. Tripcunny, rolling his eyes until the whites showed horribly, "for once I don't mind. Here's good luck!" He gulped the precious liquor down, and swayed. His half melted icicles scattered a semi-circle of drops on the floor. Then he sat down heavily, blowing like a grampus.

"It's getting into his head!" whispered the widow, in a flurry of alarm. "W-what shall we do? I can't have him here all night—it wouldn't be proper."

"Don't mind me, friends all!" murmured Sam, sleepily. "I shall be al'ri', presen'ly." He flapped in his seat like a

dying mackerel, and perturbation moved through the souls of the assembled company.

"That's him—all over!" whispered the widow. "The second glass always riz to his head and made his body as limp as a rag. . . ."

* * * * *

At this moment there was a clear double rap on the door, and a shrill, salt voice cried, angrily, "Sam!"

Instantly the Wraith awoke, and stood up, swaying on his feet like a ninepin in jeopardy.

"Comin', my dear, comin'!" he answered, and looking more drowned than ever, he staggered to the door, opening it to another blast of primordial wind. The wedding present flared up again, and went out with a puff of black smoke. Moonlight swam into the room, and in its cold, clear rays the little company of awed revellers saw the white form of a sea-lady of uncertain age standing on the door-step. Her eyes blazed, vixenish, under the green tresses of her damp hair. With a wrathful gesture she seized poor Sam by the ear—the widow's favourite ear—and lugged him away across the cobbles, seaward.

Then a dark cloud moved, mercifully, across the shining face of the moon, and Sarah Tripcunny, with a long, full sigh, sank back into the strong but trembling arms of Mr. Hoskin, as the faint carol of the Ruan Church Choir trickled down over the cliff:

> Christians, awake! salute the happy morn . . .

Christmas Day had dawned. . . .

There was a faint splash in the sea, far down by Dolor Ogo.

XIX.

THE VANISHING MAN.

I LEFT Mr. Strap, the coastguard, excited to tears over "The Kidnapped Bridegroom," in paper covers. Literature held him on this bright June morning, and there was no talk in him; so I moved along up the cliff, whose rugged heights were sweet and radiant with summer flowers. The nesting gulls mewed and hissed at me like cats—cats on the wing—scared at the stranger who might be after their eggs. The sea was alight with the drench of the morning sun, save here and there when violet shadows crept along the Channel as small clouds drifted high to vanish over and beyond Lizard Head. The world was full of joy, the joy of Life and Youth and Hope—and everything was clean and beautiful.

Half-way along the perilous pathway skirting the Devil's Frying-pan, we came face-to-face, the Old Gentleman and I. He was a funny little man, with a black wig set awry, and the merriest eye in the world. The tip of his nose was red, like a cherry, and under a flat-brimmed and very ancient silk hat his ears showed sharp, like a faun's. For the pack on his back he might have been Pilgrim. A fiddle was tucked away, snug under his arm, the bow anchored on to it by an elastic band, and from the breast-pocket of his tattered frock coat, brown with adventure, the mouthpieces of a couple of brass whistles peeped out. He seemed altogether too good to be true, but he passed the time o' day as friendly humans do, and on the edge of the Devil's Frying-pan we fell to talking.

* * * * *

"I am an Artist," he said, in that jerky, merry manner of his. "An Artist in Legerdemain—Illusion—Precipitation.

Once, in the dear, dead days beyond recall, I was the Famous Vanishing Man. Ah! them was times. I made gold—gold—gold!" (He held a naked hand high in the air, snapt his fingers, and, lo! a bright sovereign shone on the tips of them.) "Scores and hundreds of thousands of 'em—realler'n this!" (He rubbed it slowly until it became a threepenny bit.) "The Sultan of Turkey heard of me and my marvellous antics, and commanded me and my troupe—I had a troupe in them days—to give a show before his royal nibs and the 'arem. The royal females were so pleased that we had to go on doing marvels for eight solid hours. I remember their eyes a-shinin' behind the latticed windows as though it was only yesterday. Ah!— Real beauties they was, and they kept hissin' for encores—s-s-s-sss—until we was fair puzzled to know what to do next. We had to go on, so we gave 'em ribald songs from the 'alls and a few 'ymns to wind up with. It was great!

"Then the royal enochs come along with coffee—all dregs it was!—and the news that the Sultan was asleep and snorin'. It was time, too, for we'd got to 'Greenland's Icy Mountains'—our last 'ymn. I fancy them mountains saved us from the Bosphorus; and glad enough we was to go! I didn't fancy the look of the enochs, somehow; they made you feel all shivery down the spine. . . . But the 'arem—my stars!

* * * * *

"Since then? Well . . . bad times . . . speculation . . . separation from the old lady and the wonderfullest pair of twins in creation . . . on the Road . . . the 'Famous Vanishing Man' all on his own, too rheumaticky to Vanish successful, and mortal slow at the legerdemain. Front seats one penny; back seats sixpence—for the sake of the children. All in memory of them wonderful twins, sir! I think of the

royal Sultan and the 'arem and the enochs sometimes—and the dreggy coffee ; but I keeps merry.

" For the spring I work round the coast villages ; Juvenile Shows is my line. I make an Ass of myself—a bloomin', blitherin', blighted Ass—just for the sake of hearing the kiddies laugh. I've got a show up at Ruan Schools to-night. I'll deem it an honour if you'll come, sir. Free list ! My card will admit you and your friends ! "

He took it amiss that I insisted on paying for a shilling's-worth of back seats.

" It isn't for grown-ups," he said. " I'm ashamed to take your money ! "

" Tut ! " said I. " Don't apologise."

The little Old Gentleman bowed low. . . .

* * * * *

It was rare luck that led me to Ruan early that evening. The red sunset illuminated a moving scene. On a flat gravestone in the churchyard sat the elfish little Conjurer with his fiddle under his chin, and all the children from Ruan, Cadgwith—and even Cury Cross Roads—around him. He was telling them Tales—wonderful tales about mythological birds and beasts, and men and women, and gods and goddesses ; and between the sentences the violin sang or laughed or sobbed or squealed merrily in the rich gloaming until the entranced children seemed to grow into goblinny little mortals themselves, with eyes as big as saucers. . . . How they loved it !

Then the Conjurer danced off his tomb, and away into the schoolroom, still playing at his magic old fiddle ; and the children streamed in after him until the hall was full ; and I (in the back seats) had a very poor chance of seeing much. All I know is that the night rang with laughter, and that my

elfin and ancient acquaintance of the cliff was an Old Gentleman no longer, but a veritable Puck, producing miracles with the aid of his battered old silk hat, and something more than magic with his fiddle and the brass whistles, which he played two at a time!

At every roar of laughter he seemed to grow younger and younger—more agile and more adept at his bewildering business. Only one child did not laugh. He wore frilled knickerbockers and spectacles, and (perhaps) read Ibsen. The Conjurer gave him a shilling and bade him begone. He went, solemnly.

In the end he Vanished splendidly, and the delighted little Celts trooped home full of marvellous stories of the wonders they had seen.

* * * * *

At supper time the Conjurer rematerialised at my hotel—ears sharper and eyes brighter than ever. He fed royally upon crab and lobster, and junket and Cornish cream and pastie, with a bottle of the landlord's best "to slip it down." He took to bed with him a beaker of lemonade and gin, after declining all invitations to revisit Ruan. "Never twice—anywhere," said he. "Good-night to ye all, gentlemen! May God be with you all!"

I never saw him again; nor did the landlord. With the dawn he vanished, with the landlord's gold watch, Mr. Strap's binoculars, a pocketful of small change from the till, two fat crabs, a bottle of Plymouth gin, and his unpaid bill.

"Good luck to him!" said Mr. Strap. "If he'd had half a chance he'd 've done the 'Amelin trick, and conjured all our kids away as well! They're safe anyway, thank 'Eaving!"

Mr. Strap prides himself upon his literary touch. "After all," he says, "binoculars is all very well in their way, but give me the good old saucy telescope as pulls out and looks pleasant! Here's luck!"

XX.

THE BOBBYDAZZLER.

SUMMER and winter, rain and shine, old Jimmy Peters was awake at dawn, and within a minute or two of his waking the bright red bricks of the farmhouse kitchen down below would clatter with hob-nailed boots of Billy and Jan and Nathan waiting for the farmer's orders. He would shout down the stairs their programme for the morning, and off they would clump, growling, on the necessary business of the farm. But on Monday mornings, Jimmy would have them up in his bedroom, and read a passage from the Book to them—expounding and blowing on his fingers, as his fancy turned, with the tassel of his nightcap flapping, and his cold blue eyes showing like oysters through the lenses of his gold-rimmed spectacles. In mid-winter it was a trying business, this dawn-holiness. Jan would have to light the candle, and hold it at his master's shoulder. . . . Twice he burnt the bed curtains, and once he singed his master, whose lean figure (strangely like the shirted form of Don Quixote at penance on the mountain) leapt out of bed with a strange word, fiercely uttered. The candle went out, and in the twilight of a December dawn—a twilight pungently scented with frizzled whisker—Jimmy Peters cried that it was the Devil, and called upon his trembling labourers to assist in exorcising him.

" Down on your knees, dogs—down ! "—and with creaking bones they all flopped upon the chill linoleum, while the old farmer trumpeted terrible prayers into the gloom. " Roust him out—roust him out—and rousify us, O Lord ! "

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When the day was well aired, Mr. Peters would stalk his plough and stubble moodily. He had a fierce temper when things went wrong, and equally fierce reactions of tremendous repentance immediately afterwards. Like most excessively good creatures, he had no sense of humour ; humour to him was a sin as deadly as murder, or theft, or unfaithfulness. No one in the chapel congregation, of which estimable body he was deacon, could ever hope to be on such intimate terms with Heaven and the heavenly hosts as he. He addressed the saints in prayer with astonishing freedom of speech ; but nobody ever smiled or took Mr. Peters's colloquialisms amiss. One summer's day a drenching thunderstorm spoilt all his hay in the seven-acre field on Mark's Hill. He snatched a dripping handful from one of the ruined heaps, and, shaking it heavenward, cried in a voice choking with emotion, " Lord, *look* at Thy servant's hay ! . . . Is it fair ? "

He had his own private thunderstorm immediately after that hasty and uncalled for remark. Lightnings of remorse slashed his soul to ribbons ; in his imagination the reverberating thunder of an angry Providence shook the very marrow out of him. A crushed worm, he dragged his long, lean, tortured body to the rickyard, and summoning Billy and Jan, bade them, in a terrible voice, lash him to the iron gate, face foremost, with a cart-rope.

" And now, William," said he, " take off thy belt and give me the biggest leatherin' ye can ! I'm a miserable sinner—bound for the deepest pit ! Lay on, William, lay on ! "

Shedding tears, William obeyed, with one hand holding up his corduroy nethers and the other wielding the strap, whilst the dust rose in clouds and his basted master groaned—more in agony of soul than body. . . .

* * * * *

On Wednesday nights—chapel meetings—the old gentleman always led off with a long extempore prayer. Unexpected things generally happened during this period, and Mrs. Peters —" Judith, my dear "—was more often in a palsy of apprehension than she cared to admit. It was trying, even to her who knew the ways of her lord and master so intimately, to find herself the shy cynosure of all, when, in the middle of a fervent sentence, her husband would suddenly pause, and opening his wide, blue eyes, say :

" Judith, my dear, you are sitting in a draught !——"

Only once was anybody known to laugh at Mr. Peters on these solemn nights. On that never-to-be-forgotten occasion he was reading from the Scriptures in a deep, sonorous bass which filled the room and made the glass shades of the oil lamps ring. Slowly and terribly he launched forth the words : " And the wicked shall flourish like a green bay —"

Here he damped a broad thumb, and turned the page.

"—Like a green bay—horse ! " he read.

Instantly, a titter slipped out from the careless lips of one of the younger members of the congregation.

Mr. Peters re-damped his thumb, unconscious that two pages were stuck together, turned back to the beginning of the sentence, read it over to himself, returned the page, and, looking fiercely over the book in the direction of the unhappy giggler, said, in a terrible voice—

" Yes, Jonathan Wetters, it *is* ' horse ' ! "

He died at the age of seventy-two—grim, sarcastic, bitter,

and rich! Judith had sought peace some time before; a draught at a revival meeting had whisked her away, and she was not altogether sorry to go. Husbands like James are a trial; the old lady bore her cross with a resignation uncomplaining.

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On the eve of his departure old Jimmy summoned young Jimmy to his bedside. James junior, was a scapegrace with a mundane mind and a soul for revelry—which he probably inherited from his mother when she was much younger—the very antithesis of his father.

"James," said the old gentleman, and the voice in which he spoke was a wan ghost of the grand old chapel tones, which rang like a bell when the moments of Grace-Abounding called —"James, I'm going Up! I leave the Home Farm to you. But I shall keep an eye on you. I shall be watchin' you out of the front windows of Heaven, and seein' what a —— of a mess you're makin' of the place! Good-bye!"

He turned his face to the wall, where hung, in a straw frame, his card of membership of the Aggressive Abstainers' Gospel Union. Aggressive to the last, he went Up, full of grand schemes of reorganisation, concentration, and co-ordination. Billy and Jan were at the funeral, with sober faces and sombre clothes.

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"I reckon," said Billy, from behind his horny hand, "that the old gentleman's already provin' a rare handful!"

"Aye, I reckon he be," murmured Jan. "He was always a Bobbydazzler at cleanin' up!"

XXI.

SWEET HOME

ONLY a few hours ago I was lying in the sunny heather on Morte Point, with the bees clambering sticky-legged among the rich blossoms. Far overhead a kestrel hung in the hot haze, as motionless, seemingly, as his craggy home. Below, the incoming tide creamed and bubbled around the deadly Morte Stone, but nowhere else on the wide sea—a patchwork quilt of magical colours—was there any movement. The sun flamed in sleepy heaven ; surely out there beyond where the silver shone so wondrously, the Halcyon Bird sat dozing and dreaming—dreaming and dozing.

Behind me lay the Devon lanes, leading anywhere—nowhere. They, too, were asleep in the sun. I took one at random. It speedily became so narrow that the big, fat spiders had found no difficulty in setting their traps right across from the bracken tips on the left to the blackberry thorns on the right. They sat in the very centre of their nets, brown and hideous, and still as death until—zip . . . zip—a victim taking the morning air on gauzy wing, found herself enmeshed in bonds softer than silk, and dragged to a grisly death.

One fat terror, swinging like an acrobat on his gleaming thread, I slew with my stick, and rejoiced at the shattering of him, for he had caught a little blue butterfly. . . . The grasshoppers on either bank shook their tiny clappers shrilly at this mysterious Nemesis—chick-a-chick-a-cheek, chick-a-chick-a-chuck, and another little blue butterfly fluttered down to where the victim lay, all a-tremble, but recovering surely enough. I felt enormously heroic, and fit for any spiders, up to a dozen. The devious lane meandered on, like a glistening pathway in a dream. For nearly a mile a foolish hen-pheasant ran and hid at every twist and turn—a game of

bo-peep which we both enjoyed. Finally, she dashed into the stubble of an oatfield where a few poppies (the scarlet women of the countryside) still showed their painted faces, unashamed amid the waste. Then she vanished, for my dream lane took an unaccountable kink, and then rose up sheer into a hazel copse, frilled and fragrant with honeysuckle, bathed in sunlight and haunted with the hum of bees. Here, too, were rabbits running so fast that you could see little of them but the white scuts of their target-tails as they darted away. The thud of their feet made a noise like the thunder Gulliver heard in the Land of the Little People. Their scatter-brained terror was really laughable.

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And now—down again, down—down. More spiders, loathly and lustful, and fatter than ever; another swift death (that was two to me!); and next, in sequence as it should be, the sudden vision of a tiny churchyard filled with gravestones of slate. Each sleeper a saint, and each epitaph a rhyme, and a third of the pious dead Tuckers—John, Zachary, Elias, Benjamin, and finally Betsy (aged 87). Betsy must have had a bad time of it, travelling through this wilderness, for (said the stone):

> Darkness, and pain and grief,
> Oppress'd my gloomy mind;
> I looked around for my relief,
> But no relief could find.
>
> —R. I. P.

By her lies an old soldier "who was with Wellington," and who came home to die with a timber toe—

> Nor cannon's roar, nor rifle shot,
> Can wake him in this peaceful spot;
> With faith in Christ and trust in God,
> The SERGEANT sleeps beneath this Clod!

Zebedee Yeo, I read as I left this quaint little acre to find the continuation of my lane, was more cheerful in life and in death, than Betsy—

> Children dead, and friends as well,
> My body's free from pain;
> Laid in the dust,
> And may we trust,
> In Heaven to meet again.

Beyond the churchyard cliffs towered again. One of them was labelled "Admission Sixpence," and I knew to my sorrow that here was civilisation again—a town somewhere near, full of grasping lodging-houses and tea-shops where they don't sell cream; blatant hotels, Marine Walks (horrible things), hideous baths of sea water shut in by stone walls, and—Trippers!

Even so it was. It might have been London again but for the superfine clarity of the air, and everything labelled, shopwise—To the Grotto, 6d.; Unrivalled Cliff Walk to Lee, 3d.; and so on. Still the sun poured down; I expected every moment to be confronted by a placard announcing:

SUPERLATIVE SEPTEMBER SUNSHINE
SIXPENCE PER HOUR.

But this seemed to be the only luxury the claw-fingered corporation of this uninspiring town by the sea had forgotten to charge for. No doubt they will take the hint next year. I found the White Coons (admission 6d.), the Popular Pansy Faces (ditto), and—the Pier (twopence). I wandered on the Pier and watched a melancholy old gentleman with an ear trumpet making wild and futile casts into the sea. He was fishing, presumably; but an excursion steamer (admission 2s.) came along and carried his tackle—and me—along the coast, bound for a Splendid Day at Clovelly. The decks were

crowded with lovers and Londoners. We were entertained most dolorously by a fat man with an india-rubber countenance and a banjo, and a very thin man, who, as he produced the mouse-like noises from a German concertina, reminded me (at times) of Dante, or Mr. Forbes Robertson in the last act of "Hamlet." The fat man sang as you would imagine Sir H. Beerbohm Tree singing—

"I used to si-ii-gh
For the see-il-ver moon. . . ."

I suppose he was thin then. . . . After that, he came round and fiercely demanded money for the information. I refused the obese highwayman, but regretted it afterwards when we anchored at Clovelly, and I discovered this self-same silver moon sentimentalist at the paddle-box handing us into the boats. I eluded him by a wild leap into a very nest of lovers and laps, only to find a simple Clovelly boatman handing me a bag and ordering me to collect coin for him and his mate. Meekly I obeyed.

I am sure everybody knows Clovelly—lovely and romantic in winter, but in "the season" nothing more than a slice of Hampstead Heath at Bank Holiday time, hoisted up endways. There are some people who would vulgarise Heaven if they could get there for the day in excursion airships. Clovelly is more approachable, and you can guess the result. In the middle of the street a woeful man was playing "Killarney" on a clarionet so sadly that Betsy Tucker's epitaph came mournfully home to me. Crowds panted up the hill, and more crowds (brought by charabancs and coaches) clattered down. I passed into the church for peace and meditation, only to find a young woman shaking a collection box in my face. I wandered into the historic Clovelly Court. The sun had gone in, the wind was moaning, the sea was grey—summer had vanished! In the sob of the wind dead leaves whirled and

rustled. Over the doorway of the lodge I saw a legend engraved—" Go East, go West—Home's Best."

So I took the hint, re-embarked upon the " Hesperus," sailed the wintry sea, weathered the Morte Stone; and—*voila m'sieurs*—here are the lights of London, and the roar and the rattle and the throb of her; and here am I! Home's Best, after all!

XXII.

THE DELUGE.

EIGHT hundred feet above the level of the sea—the abiding place of hollow-cheeked invalids—the Mecca of the melancholy man with slack limbs and lustreless eyes, too tired to see the beauty of his Hill of Exile, but acquiescent with the patience that pain brings—the Hill of the Winds, the mountain home of cool breezes, where amid the pines, Zephyr all of a flutter may be caught in her lair. But here, as elsewhere in this sweltering Isle, the Hill of the Winds is false to its name, and sweet little Zephyr, breathless and sweat-dewed, lies inert by the sedge on the mill-pool's border. Weep, ye mortals; Zephyr lies a-dying—sunstruck.

* * * * *

The sky is a brazen bowl hammered out and polished by that crook-legged old anvil-smiter Vulcan, and if there be a passing cloud here and there, 'tis no more than a breath of steam from Vulcanic lungs. And across the brazen bowl rages the sun, hour after hour, day after day, with his pitiless torch, flaming, flaming. . . . At night among these rampant hills of fair Sussex there is no change, except that the sky is

indigo-hued and stove-polished (Pluto taking in hand the waste rag whilst Vulcan snores amid his raked cinders) and streaming with hot stars like tears. Presently, the moon rides out over the tall pines, with a red face like a harvesting wench, and neither cold nor chaste. We toss and mutter in our beds. There is no sleep under the ban of this wizard moon. The night-hags are out flying their broomsticks from Crowborough Beacon to Amberley Height. "Bubble, bubble—toil and trouble!"

From my bedroom window I can see the cool ocean flashing like a mirror in the sun. "Cool?" says my friend the Cucumber Grower, as he leans over his fence. "Cool? It's that cool, you could bile eggs in it. I was down there yesterday, and red lobsters—red, mind ye!—was strugglin' out of their native hellement, lookin' for a shady rock to sit under!"

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"Do you ever remember such weather?" I ask.

"Once—yes!" says the Cucumber Grower, in a far-away voice. "It was in a Dream. I dreamt I'd gone to the Hot place for my misdeeds. I was settin' on a heap o' slag, watchin' the thermometer rising, and just as it riz to a hundred an' ten in the shade I woke up to find the house afire. And on the insurance money I started the vegetable business. And if this weather continues I shouldn't be surprised at another fire. Even cucumbers is perishin' . . . And tomaters ——"

Suddenly the demeanour of my agrarian friend changed from dreamy lassitude to highwayman alertness. At the tomato stage he broke off short, like a snapped twig—

"There!" he cried, "Didn't ye hear it? Listen!" His broad ears flapped with excitement.

"There—again!" he shouted, waving a hand toward the distant hills. I was conscious of a very faint and distant detonation in the sullen atmosphere—echo of a Goliath yawn arrested midway.

"'Tis Jerry Blake's donkey, Abimelech—brayin'!" He spoke the phrase in ecstacy, and his tanned face shone as if he had heard the holy angels choiring down the vale. I was unmoved. Abimelech's bray was too far on for its subtleties of tone and timbre to be critically appreciated. Then the Cucumber Grower declared that any fool ought to know that a braying donkey meant rain—certain, inside twelve hours; and I apologised.

* * * * *

My friend sped the glad news across the town—a tiny town, but rare for gossip. The barber said, as he plied his foaming brush, "Most welcome end to the drowt, sir—not afore it's wanted, sir!" And when the customer failed to see the point (the sun still flaring, and the sky copper), the barber explained that the drowt was as good as over, because Jerry Blake's donkey Abimelech had been brayin'. At the post office it was the same. Every purchaser of a stamp heard the glad news of Abimelech's vocal essay, the Cucumber Grower refrained from watering his tomatoes (since dead), careful cottagers saw to their drains, and cleared the pine needles out of their roof gutters, and the week-night gathering of Free and Independents sang with great heartiness (on the assurance of Abimelech), "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

In the hot glow of eventide we assembled in the street and on Beacon Hill to watch the Storm coming up. Far upon the horizon the sky was lead—"scraped lead," but there was not even the shadow of a fist in heaven to suggest imminence of

the blessed rain. Somebody said that the wind was "backing," and we gambled on that for an hour or two. Heaven was obdurate; a brazen hussy, glandless for tear-shedding. The sun sunk in a ferocious, molten Tophet behind the westward pines. Territorials, tottering back to their arid camp, drove the chalk dust up in clouds. Peeled faces and heaving chests told of their gruelling. There was no glad light in their eyes; their scouts had not yet brought in the news of Abimelech and his abysmal throat-notes trumpeting the Deluge!

* * * * *

Our faith in Abimelech was supreme—unshatterable! Baalam never owned ass more assuring.

We waited patiently, sniffing the air.

It was in the afterglow of this miraculous evening that a gaunt figure might have been observed walking gloomily up the street. This was Jerry Blake, master of the glamorous, thistle-chewing Prophet of Rain, and a sour man, as a beginner at the mysteries of the trombone is likely to be. Beaming faces glowed upon him—to his surprise. Had he only been astride of Abimelech, the tableau would have been complete, and he would have had a swelling welcome! At a distance, respectful but eavesdropping, the crowd hustled to see what passed between Jerry and the Cucumber Grower. Congratulations. Pump-handling. A wagging of heads. And then——

"My donkey?—what donkey?"

"Why, Mr. Blake, Abimelech, of course!"

"Abimelech? Then 'twas his ghost you heard. He died the day afore yesterday of sunstroke, and I had to bury him quick. This be terrible weather for the dead!"

"But I'll swear I heard him. Couldn't be mistook! . . ."

That Jerry Blake possesses a saving grace of humour and

the sense of it smote upon the comprehension of the eavesdroppers, who declare that he said to the Cucumber Grower, half chuckle and half sigh : " What you heard must ha' been me practisin' the bass of ' There is a Happy Land, far, far away,' on the trombone. Now I come to think of it, it *do* remind me of poor Abimmy ! "

* * * * *

He turned and walked gloomily down the street, with something glittering at the corner of his eye.

The fays and the fir-sprites buried poor little Zephyr last night by the corpse candle of the moon. For sepulchre they chose a thistle-grown hillside where, under more fodder than he ever can eat, sleeps the patient Prophet of Rain.

We are still waiting for the Deluge !

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